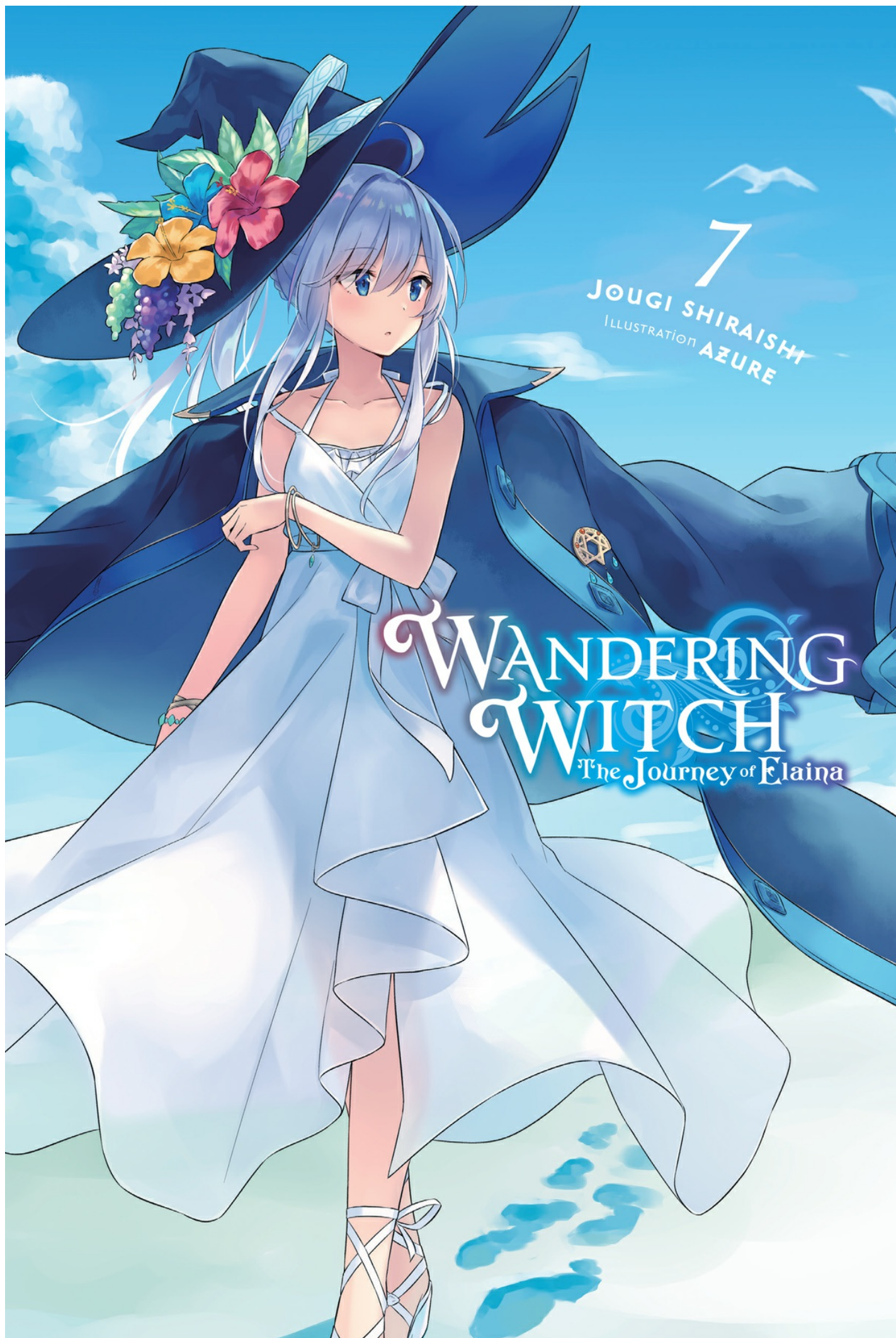




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JOUGI SHIRAISHI
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WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina





I'm interested in you.

The
Ashen Witch
ELAINA

A brilliant young woman who, at a very young age, earned the rank of witch: the most prestigious among mages. Slightly obsessed with money, but a good person at heart. (...Probably.)

ALTE

A girl enrolled in the magic course at Latorita State University. Very talented in matters of magic, but very poor at ordinary subjects. Acquired a mysterious pocket watch by chance...

"Just think of what I could do with something like this! Hooray!"



LINARIA

A girl enrolled in the magic course at Latorita State University. Top honors student at the university but is always reading or studying alone. Appears cool at first glance but is a passionate history enthusiast.

"I hate not knowing things."



LUCIELLA

An ancient dragon awakened after being sealed away for four hundred years. Has assumed human form for an unknown reason. Behaves arrogantly but is actually a clumsy girl who knows nothing of the world.

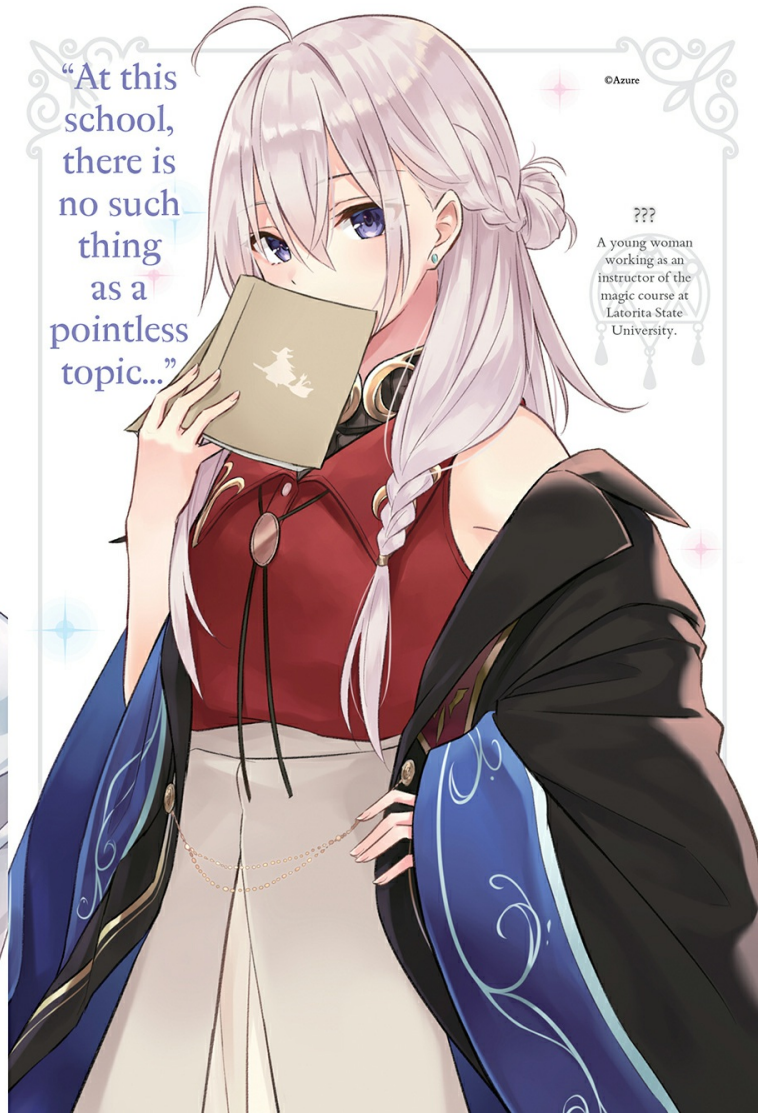
“Mwah-ha-ha-ha! It’s been a while, humans!”



???

A young woman working as an instructor of the magic course at Latorita State University.

“At this school, there is no such thing as a pointless topic...”



WANDERING WITCH 7

The Journey of Elaina

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WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina

JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Illustration
AZURE

7


NEW YORK

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Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Translation by Nicole Wilder

Cover art by Azure

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CHAPTER 1

Once Upon a Time, in a Certain Place

That day, I arrived in a very, very strange city.

It was a mysterious place, and awfully difficult to form a solid impression of. I don't mean that it had no distinguishing features or that it wasn't an interesting locale.

The city had obviously changed a lot in recent years. Built up among the older stone structures that looked to have been standing there through the ages were newer wooden buildings that seemed to have been erected in a hurry, as well as brand-new homes with plaster walls. All of them were jumbled together, as if this city had been made of pieces of different cities from around the world. It was a weird sort of place that was hard to describe but easy to remember.

People were flowing endlessly through the city streets—there were normal people, there were mages, there were beastkin, and there were even demons. It was a city where, like the buildings, all species freely intermingled.

Thanks to this, my walk around town allowed me to witness all sorts of interesting sights.

I had visited cities like this one—where all sorts of diverse cultures met—only a few times before now. I could count the occasions on one hand.

I bet you could travel for years and never find a city as peculiar as this one. I was obviously intrigued. I had to know more about the history of a place that openly accepted people of all species.

I suppose this brand of curiosity is in a traveler's nature, don't you think?

".....Hmm."

And so, I found myself standing in a used bookstore, eagerly perusing the historical records. Yeah, I know, it was a little rude of me to sample the merchandise, but since different history books and historical biographies emphasize different things depending on an author's personal history and political views, it wasn't like I was going to buy one without checking. If

possible, I preferred to purchase several different histories after reading them first.

So I was quite rudely standing there, lost in a book, when I heard a voice behind me.

“Goodness! Would you have an interest in history?”

The old shopkeeper crept from the depths of the store. I felt a momentary chill, expecting to be scolded for standing there and reading without buying, but she wore a gentle expression, small wrinkles creasing her eyes, and said, “How admirable for one so young. It’s rare, these days, to find a child who takes an interest in the bygone eras.”

Her eyes were kind, as if she were admiring a grandchild who loved doing schoolwork.

Then the old woman looked me up and down and asked, as if she could see right through me, “You’re not from around here, are you, child?”

“...You can tell?” I half expected that, in a city like this, it would be easy to blend in no matter what I looked like.

I guess there was something that still labeled me an outsider.

“I’ve been in this city for a very long time, you know. I can more or less tell. Enough to know whether someone is a foreigner or not.”

“Wow... Is that so...?”

“To be honest, the folks who pop up in this dusty old bookshop are usually from out of town...” When I didn’t respond, the old shopkeeper chuckled. “Well, if you’ve got an interest in this city’s history, why don’t I tell you about it? That would be much easier to understand than reading a book, wouldn’t it?”

“.....”

Well now, that’s a better offer than I could have expected.

“Um...so here’s the thing. I don’t really have any money right now, but—”

That was another reason I was trying to learn as much as I could by standing here reading.

The old woman laughed again. "It's fine! Don't worry about that. It's something I like to talk about, so I just thought I would offer. In an old shop like mine, I've got nothing but time."

"....."

"I'd love the company. Why not help an old lady while away the hours?"

Then she headed into the back of the shop.

She turned around and beckoned to me once to follow her.

I put the book I was holding back in its place and followed her back to a private room.

There, she took a seat in a chair and spoke. "Once upon a time, in a certain place..."

As if she were speaking to her granddaughter.

She began to recount the history of the city, bit by bit.



CHAPTER 2

Sharon the Liar

A tranquil summer atmosphere embraced the forest. The breeze, which had not yet lost the cool of springtime, rustled the leaves on the trees as it blew past. A lone traveler, who had not yet reached her destination, made her way through the wood atop a broom.

The young woman had ashen hair and lapis-colored eyes, and she wore a black robe and a triangular hat. Clipped to her breast was a single star-shaped brooch.

Her broom was her ticket to freedom, allowing her to always wander from one place to the next. She was a traveler, and also a witch.

She was never in a hurry. It was important to enjoy the journey at one's own pace. The witch sucked in a lungful of cool air, thinking to herself that the chill breeze blowing through the forest seemed like a sigh of lamentation for the passing of spring. When she exhaled, it, too, sounded almost like a sigh.

So then...

This woman, fully enjoying her time alone, seemingly reluctant to let it end, who on earth could she be?

That's right, she's me.

"Hello, hello! Good day to you, Miss Witch. Are you well?"

And she's also the person being addressed.

"....."

There was a lone girl standing directly in my path.

This girl, who had shattered my blissful quiet without a shred of remorse, put a hand to her chin and smiled. "Hmm... That settles it!"

"...Hello?"

I stopped my broom and looked down at her.

Her blue robe was garnished with lace, and her skirt was made of multiple layers of frills. Her outfit, coupled with the strange pose she was striking, made her look pretty cute. There also was a star-shaped brooch upon her breast—the mark of a witch.

If I had to guess, I would say she was around eighteen years old. Her hair hung down to her shoulders and was the same shade of blue as her robe. She had been wearing the same self-satisfied expression the whole time, as if it was pasted on her face.

“...Hmm-hmm!”

More than anything else about her, I was getting slightly fed up with that expression of hers, which seemed to say, “*I know everything!*” I couldn’t tell you what this witch—who had barely said two words to me by this point—had to feel so pleased about.

“What’s your name? I’m Sharon, by the way.”

“Elaina.”

“I see. So tell me, Elaina, what on earth brings you to a place like this?” Sharon’s expression was unchanging.

“By any chance, did you come because you have business at the thieves’ hideout up ahead? If so, you had better stop now. Those aren’t people you want to mess around with.”

“No, I’m not interested in thieves or anything like that. I’m just passing through.”

“You’re just saying that. You actually intend to go destroy the thieves’ hideout, don’t you? No need to admit it. It’s written plain on your face.”

“No, um... I’m really not interested in thieves or whatever...”

More to the point, I’ve only just learned that there are thieves up ahead...

Just what is this witch trying to tell me?

Not having the slightest idea of what she was going on about, I tilted my head in confusion.

“Hmm-hmm...!” The witch once again flashed a triumphant grin. “Perhaps you were entrusted with the task by people from the next city over? Well, naturally, you came to act as an assistant to the great and powerful witch, Sharon... However! That’s just too bad! For I am not in need of an assistant!”



“Uh-huh...”

No one’s asked me to come here, though...

“Unbelievable! If you came at their behest...then it seems like they still don’t quite believe in the extent of my true power. But...no matter! I can destroy the thieves waiting down the road all by myself! Hmm-hmm!”

“It sure...seems that way...” I wasn’t giving anything she said any real thought, so for the time being, I nodded along. I find that whenever I get trapped in a conversation with someone like this, who keeps on talking on and on, if I just give perfunctory responses, it moves the conversation right along.

“But on the other hand, if you were to say that you were intent on becoming my assistant no matter what—that you wanted to distinguish yourself by challenging the thieves despite the danger...I suppose I might be willing to let you assist me. Just a little. Why, you’re probably in need of money, aren’t you? How about I split the reward with you?”

“I mean, I’m not broke or anything, so—”

“How about it? Don’t you want to become my assistant and defeat the thieves together? You can become *my* assistant, you know. An opportunity like this rarely comes around twice!”

“Never again would be too soon.”

“.....”

“.....”

When I flatly refused, the great and powerful Sharon went silent. I didn’t really understand what was going on. All I knew was that, sure, maybe I did have quite a lot of free time just then. But spending any of it volunteering to personally take on a gang of thieves seemed like a bad idea. The only thing for me to do was to respectfully decline Sharon’s proposal.

“...I don’t really understand what’s going on, but good luck dealing with the thieves, all right?”

After a half-hearted bow from atop my broom, I turned to leave that place—

“Wait a second.”

...Well, I tried to leave, but I was stopped by a considerable force.

Holding tight to my robe was the one and only Sharon.

“Wait...um...I’ll say it once more, okay?” She coughed once and cleared her throat. “You see, I am...an amazing witch.”

“Right.”

I heard that already.

“And you see, I said I would help you exterminate the thieves.”

“Right.”

I heard that, too.

“So?”

“No.”

“Oh, um...”

“If you’re such an amazing witch, then you should be able to take down the thieves by yourself, right? I’m certainly not going to go out of my way to steal your hard-earned glory. So don’t worry.”

“.....” After a moment’s silence, she said, “I’m going to say it one more time, okay?”

“Sure.”

Again?

“All right, so...I’m a mage.”

Sharon indicated her brooch with a blank expression.

“...Right.”

“So if you don’t mind, would you please help me?” The nuances of Sharon’s speech had begun subtly shifting.

“No.”

However, I still politely declined.

“.....”

“.....”

“Um, one more time, perhaps—”

“No, I’ve heard enough.”

“Wait! One more time! Just let me plead my case once more! Seriously!” Now Sharon was getting frantic. “Ah, I see! That’s it, right? Elaina, could it be that, perhaps, you don’t understand the situation very well?”

“No, I think I understand it just fine, but—”

“Okay, okay. I’ll explain it step by step.”

No, you really don’t have to do that...

“First of all, I am not a mage.”

Sharon removed her robe with a blank expression.

“Right, right... Wait, what?”

What’s going on?

“But the folks in a nearby city mistook me for a powerful witch. You see, they entrusted me with exterminating the thieves! It’s an awful dilemma! Ha-ha-ha!”

“Wait, what’s the dilemma...? And what do you mean, you’re not a mage?”

“It’s a little embarrassing to admit, but I’m just an innocent young girl with dreams of being a witch.”

“And...why do you look so pleased to admit something so awkward?”

So that’s what’s going on.

This girl’s just your run-of-the-mill nutjob.

“Good grief...those folks from the city are really unbelievable.” Sharon shrugged. My words didn’t seem to be getting through to her. “But what on earth is someone like me, who can’t use magic or anything, doing in a place like this...? You’re at least a little curious, aren’t you?”

“No, I can pretty much guess.”

“Oh?”

“You were probably mistaken for a witch, thanks to your misleading appearance, then heaped with praise and entrusted with the thief situation, right?”

I had just met this woman, but she seemed to have the kind of personality that could never refuse a request. I was sure she had agreed to do as the townspeople had asked, promising to make quick work of the thieves.

“.....” Sharon was silent as she listened to my speculation. Then she smiled. “...Humph, seems you’re quite clever, aren’t you?” She was wearing the same self-satisfied expression as before. “Actually, there’s a deeper reason for why I’ve come this far into the forest—”

I didn’t listen much past that point, as Sharon had suddenly launched into an extended monologue. Even as I was thinking that it probably wasn’t that deep of a reason, ultimately, I had completely missed my chance to escape and ended up keeping her company while she talked to herself.



The traveler Sharon had always wanted to be a witch.

Her motives were generally incredibly shallow: one being that the word *witch* had a nice ring to it and another being the thrill she got when she saw the adorable robes witches got to wear.

But dreams didn’t always become reality, and despite Sharon’s strong feelings and many long hours of training, she never learned how to use magic. She simply lacked the gift.

Sharon had turned eighteen earlier that year, but she had never given up on her childhood dream. That ambition burned in her heart all the way to adulthood.

But she couldn’t use magic.

What could be done about that?

“Humph...even if I can’t use magic...I’ve got this!”

“This” was a disguise. Sharon didn’t have any aptitude for magic, but she was

a skilled seamstress, and after several nights of sewing and many pricked fingers, she had produced a passable witch outfit.

And so, proudly dressing herself in a (homemade) blue robe with a (homemade) star-shaped brooch, Sharon set out on a journey.

Everyone in her hometown knew that Sharon couldn't use magic, so she had no choice but to travel far away if she wanted people to believe she was a witch. Far from home, she could complete the transformation into an ordinary traveling witch.

"Hey, look! It's a witch! Cool..." Every place she visited, the townsfolk would gawk in wonder.

"She's so pretty... I want to become an amazing witch like her one day..." Wherever she went, she was welcomed with open arms.

Sharon was apparently blessed by fate, because none of the people in any of the places she had visited knew much of anything about witches. And no one had tried to pick a fight with her at any of her destinations, nor had she fallen in with any questionable characters.

However, with the grand title of "witch" hanging from her neck, Sharon was bound to attract people looking for help, whether she wanted to get involved or not. It was the destiny of a traveling witch to deal with those sorts of requests wherever she went.

"Ummm...excuse me, please...Madam Witch... I've got a request to make..."

"What is it?"

Sharon tilted her head questioningly as she smiled broadly at the girl who had approached her.

The girl knit her eyebrows and answered, "The truth is, my favorite skirt has gotten old, and I can't wear it anymore... If you don't mind, could you please use your magic and fix it for me...?"

Sharon was in a bind.

She definitely couldn't use magic, but she did have something else: incredible self-confidence. So, of course, she wasn't going to refuse.

“Humph, very well. I shall mend this garment for you and make it into something incredible,” Sharon promised triumphantly. But without even the slightest bit of magic, how was she planning to fix the skirt?

The answer was simple.

“Listen up, all right? I’m going to use magic now, so you are absolutely not to open this door. Do you understand?”

As if she was working to repay some infernal debt, Sharon shut herself away in her room and feverishly set to work using her actual skills—sewing the skirt back together.

The next morning, with bags under her eyes, Sharon delivered the mended skirt to the girl who had made the request.

“All right, here you go.”

“Wow, amazing! It’s beautiful, and it looks brand-new!”

When it came to sewing, Sharon’s skills may well have exceeded anything that could be produced with magic. Her talents were truly amazing. Rumors of the beautiful garment she had repaired spread like wildfire.

Sharon’s reputation immediately became the talk of the town. All sorts of people came to visit her and make requests. But that was no problem for Sharon.

“I...um...spilled some soy sauce on my clothes...”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. Leave it to me.”

She did some normal stain removal.

“The truth is, I bought the wrong size of clothes...”

“Ho-ho, leave it to me! I’ll adjust them to the perfect size.”

She did a normal resizing.

“The truth is, I’d like to put the clothes I no longer wear to good use...”

“Okay, how about I turn them into handbags?”

She simply repurposed the fabric and stitched new handbags.

And that was how Sharon pretended to use magic and flourished in her own way. And who could blame her?

But soon, rumors spread that there was a powerful witch in town, and her presence caught the eye of some bedraggled-yet-important people who wanted to make use of her brilliance.

“You there, you’re the witch Sharon, right?” One day, a portly older man approached her. He held out a business card. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Hmm...?” Sharon took the card. Apparently, this rotund man was a state official, and he told her that he had come to ask for her help.

“Near our city, there’s a forest, and the truth is that recently, we’ve been having trouble with a group of thieves that live there. They raid our city and rob us blind. Lately, they’ve been stealing clothes that are headed for market. They’re a really troublesome bunch.”

“In other words, you’re having a problem with highway bandits. Is that right? That’s too bad—” Sharon nodded self-importantly, chin in hand.

The official stared at her, so full of confidence, then continued, “So...we’re asking you to exterminate these bandits for us.”

“Um...”

“You’re a witch, right? We want you to punish them once and for all.”

“Uh...w-well, um, just hold on a second...”

There was no way she could do it. After all, she was just a simple girl who longed to be a witch.

“Can we count on your help, Witch Sharon?”

Is this guy serious? There’s no way I can deal with something like that!

On the other hand, Sharon knew that if she refused, her reputation as a witch, which she had worked so hard to build with her sewing, would be done for.

Sharon was very troubled over how to answer, but she knew that if she showed even the slightest hint of worry, she might seem suspicious, so she kept her expression calm as she muttered to herself, “Hmm... What to do...?”

That's when it happened.

"Hyaaaah! Listen up, worms! We've come to take your clothes again!"

The thieves from the forest arrived. Each of them wore great bunches of fabric wound around their waists. They all carried vicious-looking cudgels. Sharon thought they seemed less like thieves and more like cavemen, but she didn't have much time to appreciate the irony behind a group of nearly naked clothes thieves.

"It's Lady Sharon! She came right away! Please help us!"

"Miss Sharon! Help us, please!"

"Teach these thieves a lesson!"

The residents of the town saw their opportunity and pushed Sharon forward until she was squaring off against the thieves.

"Uh-huh? Hang on...um...!"

Sharon was forced to meet the thieves face-to-face.

"Huh? Who the hell is this? What're you lookin' at, missy?!"

Sharon was quaking in her shoes, wondering what she could possibly do to the scary group before her, but—

"Miss Sharon's here now, so you guys are done for! Whoo-hoo!"

"You better watch your backs, you bozos!"

"Morons!"

The crowd of excited townsfolk had cut off any hope of a retreat.

"Now, wait a second..."

Sharon would have loved nothing more than for them to stop talking her up.

Meanwhile, the thieves, antagonized by the citizens, barked their reply.

"Oh...so you're a witch? What's your business with us? Don't tell me you've buddied up with these people and plan to fight us... You really think you stand a chance?"

About ten thieves had come to town that day. If Sharon had been a real witch,

she could have dealt with all of them in the blink of an eye, but she was just a simple girl.

“Come on, don’t be rude. For your own sakes, you’d better tuck your tails between your legs and run along.” Despite her apparent disadvantage, Sharon wore her perpetually smug expression.

Her escape route had disappeared, so you could say she had gone on the offensive.

“Me at full power against all of you...? It’s no contest.”

No contest, indeed. But her witchy appearance and unusually high confidence led the thieves to misinterpret her words.

“All right, then in that case, I’ll take you on.” The man who appeared to be the leader of the gang pulled a handgun from the fabric around his waist. “Do you know what this is?”

“...Humph!” Sharon laughed through her nose.

Huh? No way. They brought guns? Not just those cudgels? Aaah!

Internally, she was terrified...

“Even guys like us know how much trouble witches can be. But we also know that witches are only strong ’cause they can use magic. If I don’t give the witch a chance to use her magic, she doesn’t amount to much!”

That was true of witches. However, his opponent was just an ordinary girl.

“W-wait just a moment. You want to use *that* against *me*? ...Are you insane?”

Sharon was beginning to panic. There was little she could do about a weapon like that. A single shot could very well kill her.

“Hmm...you plannin’ on beggin’ for your life?” The leader of the thieves didn’t seem inclined to listen to such pleas. “But it’s too late now, anyway! I’m gonna make you regret standin’ up to us!”

The lead thief didn’t give Sharon a chance to explain; he just pulled the trigger.

“Hyaaah!” Sharon winced and curled into a ball.

The explosive gunshot echoed throughout the city.

“Grrraaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

Down fell the leader of the thieves.

Allow me to explain what took place in that single moment.

The leader of the bandits had indeed fired his gun at Sharon. However, he wasn't used to handling a firearm and missed his target. The bullet didn't even graze her. Instead, it hit a nearby garbage can, ricocheted off a lamppost, bounced off a pot lid held by a woman from the neighborhood who was out for a walk, then flew around this way and that until it finally hit the bandit leader directly in the knee.

Thanks to this miraculous sequence of events, Sharon was entirely unscathed.

“U-unbelievable! The boss's gun didn't have any effect...!”

“That witch— She did something just then!”

“She used magic even though she's not holding a wand... How is that possible?”

“Incredible! I didn't know witches could do stuff like that!”

The gang of thieves huddled, marveling at the miracle. With their leader out of the fight, they obviously had no idea what to do. The gang was milling around in a panic like a beheaded insect.

“Kuh...! You bastards! Withdraw for now!”

Eventually, with a shout from their leader, who had lost his fighting spirit along with his kneecap, the thieves ran away all of a sudden.

“I'll remember thiiiiiiiis!”

The other thieves chimed in with their own parting remarks as they fled.

“.....” Sharon had curled up in terror, and before she knew it, the thieves had run away. She was rather bewildered by this mysterious turn of events, but when she stood up, she was wearing a triumphant expression.

“That was my special move just now.”

If I had been there, I would have smacked her on the head and told her not to get carried away, but to the townspeople, she was their savior.

“Incredible! That’s our Lady Sharon!”

“Long live Miss Sharon!”

“Sharon is so great!”

“With her around, we have nothing to fear!”

“Amazing! Somebody hold me!”

They crowded around her with so much enthusiasm that it seemed like they might toss her into the air at any moment.

Of course, despite her outward confidence, Sharon was still just a teenage girl. She understood perfectly the dangerous situation she had just created.

Huh? If I stick around, won’t that gang come back looking to settle the score...? And next time, I’m sure to be done for... Waah!

It was unthinkable.

If she didn’t escape right away, she was bound to get dragged into whatever troublesome things were to come.

“Humph...” And so, wearing her triumphant expression, she said, “It is unfortunate, but I must be going now. I’m just an ordinary traveler, after all.”

First of all, she thought, I have to leave this city as soon as possible.

“That’s our Sharon! I bet you’re planning to go take out the thieves’ headquarters!”

“Uh?”

“You’re pretending to leave the city, but you’re actually gonna go choke the life out of those guys, right? That is so Sharon.”

“No...um...”

“Hooray for Sharon!”

“Hooray!”

“Hooray!”

“Amazing! Somebody hold me!”

“Waah...”

Even if she was just a teenage girl, Sharon was such a people pleaser that it was almost sad. There was only one way she could reply to the townspeople.

“Humph...all right, leave it to me! It’ll be a piece of cake for me to take on those thieves!”

Of course, if I had been there, I would have smacked her on the head and told her not to get carried away.



“Allow me to reintroduce myself. My name is Sharon. My strengths include sewing and lying.”

“You just came right out and said it!”

“My weaknesses include bugs, and ghosts, and humans, and demons, and dark places, and bears, and fish, and mushrooms, and all sorts of other things.”

“I’m amazed you’ve made it this far.”

“As I mentioned in the tale I’ve just told you, I seem to have been roped into launching an attack on the thieves’ hideout that lies just ahead.”

“Sure seems that way. Good luck with that! See ya.”

I turned around and walked away.

“W-wait, please!” Sharon grabbed my hand in a panic. “Please help me! If I go in like this, I’ll die!” She was already starting to tear up.

“Wait...but didn’t you voluntarily accept the job...? It’s got nothing to do with me.”

“Don’t say that! You can get a lot of money if you take down the thieves! I can split the reward money with you! Honest!”

“But I don’t really need money, so...”

“All right, then think of it as an act of mercy!”

“I don’t have time to help a stranger.”

“Please! Help me! I beg of you! I’ll die! Seriously, I’m gonna die!” Sharon had quickly gone right past the teary-eyed stage, and her face was now covered in snot. Big tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Her cute face was a mess, and at the same time, her triumphant expression had morphed into something enormously pitiful.

“.....”

She was clinging to my robe and wouldn’t let go. It was only a matter of time before she would likely do something foolish, like dirty my robe.

I had a feeling that even if I managed to ditch her here, this girl would chase me to hell and back, whining the whole way. That’s how clingy she was—both the girl and her mucus.

“...Ugh.” And so, after letting out a huge sigh, I said, “...Well, fine then. I get it. I guess I can help you.”

“Humph, so you finally feel like helping me, do you? Well, try not to drag me down, heh—”

“Bye.”

“Aaah, wait! It was a joke! I was kidding! It was just a joke!”

Sharon clung to my arm.

“Please don’t get too carried away.” I brought my fist down and bopped her on the head. “More importantly, why are you always putting on an act? Is there some reason for it?”

At my words, Sharon made the expected triumphant expression and answered me with a hand on her chin. “Everyone likes it when I act this way.”

“So...it’s safe to say that everyone around you is an idiot, then?”

“How rude! This is my identity.”

In what way is lying all the time an identity?

“So where is the thieves’ hideout?” I was already getting desperate to wrap this up. “Show me to it. I’ll clean it out promptly.”

Allow me to prove that a gang of idiots in makeshift loincloths are nothing

when confronted by a real witch.



Deep in the forest, we found the thieves' hideout easily enough.

"That's the gang's headquarters over there. There are two lookouts at the entrance." Sharon suddenly peeked her head out from the cover of the tall grass and scowled at the entrance to the cave that was serving as the hideout. "The leader, who I defeated, is probably hidden away inside."

"...It wasn't really *you* who defeated him, though, was it?"

He took himself out, didn't he? Lying hasn't done you any favors so far.

"Listen up! That is the only entrance and exit. Meaning that until we take out those two lookouts, we can't get inside. That's where you come in. I want you to get those two under control."

When you put it that way, it sounds like you're going to take care of everyone except the lookouts...

"By the way, if that's the only way in, it must be the only way out, right?"

"That's right."

"In that case, couldn't we take them all out at once if we tossed a bomb or something inside?"

"We can't! As witches, it would be against our moral code to do something that fiendish!"

"....."

It seemed Sharon thought a little too highly of witches. She must have been under the delusion that all witches were upright and incorruptible, that we were flawless beings beyond reproach. It made me want to whisper into her ear that witches were only human and also broke the rules and committed heinous acts from time to time. I wanted to shatter that sickly sweet illusion of hers. I didn't, though.

"All right, this is your chance to shine. If you're really worthy of wearing that brooch...show me what you can do!" Somehow, Sharon was looming over me from above. She snorted through her nose and leaned against a tree trunk, then

jerked her thumb toward the cave. “When I give the signal, you attack those two punks.”

Why has the discussion turned toward me taking out two guys all alone...?

“Assuming I defeat the two lookouts, what do we do after that?”

“Then *you* go inside and beat the rest of the gang.”

“And what will *you* be doing in the meantime?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’ll be waiting here for your return! Hmm-humph!”

“So basically, you won’t be lifting a finger. I see.”

You’re happy giving people orders and then relaxing peacefully in the shade.

“I suppose not—because unfortunately, as you can see, I’m in quite a state!”

As she spoke, she pointed at her knees.

“.....” I lowered my gaze and looked at them. “They’re really shaking, huh?!”

That they were.

She was trembling with fear. Her knees were knocking so hard I thought they might crack. A newborn fawn would have been steadier on its feet.

“If I go out there like this, I’ll probably die, so...” Sharon stuck her tongue out impishly.

“.....”

I wasn’t sure how to respond.

In this situation, it would’ve actually been more convenient—for several reasons—for her to lead the charge while I provided support. I had never visited the city that had made the request for the extermination of the thieves, meaning that if I were to attack them, it would be the same as a random person appearing out of the blue and assaulting them for no reason. If things went poorly, there was even a possibility that I would receive no reward. I hate having my time wasted.

Besides, it wouldn’t have been right to let Sharon get away with foisting the entire job off onto a stranger.

Let's make sure she earns her part of the reward...

I conspicuously looked over her shoulder at the tree behind her back.

"By the way, Sharon."

"Yes?"

"Can you remind me what your weaknesses are again?"

"Bugs, and ghosts, and humans, and demons, and dark places, and bears, and fish, and mushrooms, and all sorts of other things."

"Hmm...is that right? There's a spider on your shoulder."

".....Hmm?" Sharon flicked her eyes over to her shoulder.

A little spider was climbing it with unsteady steps.

"....." Sharon was silent.

"....." I was silent.

And then...

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

"Ah, hang on—"

Ignoring my attempt to stop her, Sharon bolted from the spot at full speed. Thrown into a panic, she forgot the shakiness of her legs and made a beeline for the entrance to the thieves' hideout.

Her unexpected actions surprised even me, so the two thieves on lookout duty were definitely caught off guard. The two men were startled by Sharon appearing so suddenly from the shadows, and they shouted, "H-hey, what the hell are you doing?!" But a moment later, they seemed to realize who it was.

"H-her...! It's the witch from before! She's come to attack us!"

"Shit...! Planning to drive us from our home, is she?!"

They gripped their cudgels and immediately prepared for a fight. Their reactions were a little too quick.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

Then Sharon, still shrieking in fear over a little spider, charged directly at the pair of bandits.

They turned to face the approaching witch, brandishing their cudgels.

“Damn witch!”

One of them swung his cudgel like a bat, from the right.

“Die!”

The other swung from the left.

“Hyaaaah!” Just before both cudgels smashed her flat, Sharon let out an aggressive shriek and fell to the ground. Her legs must have gotten tangled up under her.

The two cudgels cut through the air, missing their marks, and each slammed into the side of the face of the other man. They had each thrown their whole weight behind the attacks, and their heads made dull thudding sounds on impact.

“Gwah...!”

“Ngah...!”

The two lookouts uttered wordless exclamations as they bashed each other.

Plainly put, our adversaries had once again defeated themselves.

“Ugh... Th-that hurt...”

By the time Sharon stood back up, on the verge of tears, the two lookouts had already passed out on the ground.

“Huh? What’s going on...?”

She had fallen and gotten back up, only to find that her enemies were unconscious. Her confusion was perfectly reasonable.

Though the truth was that I had pushed her from behind with a spell to make her fall, using considerable force to make sure she wasn’t hit by the cudgels.

“...It couldn’t be...” Sharon got up and turned around to look at me. “Don’t tell me, this is...!” She seemed to have guessed the truth. “Perhaps my magical

abilities have finally begun to bloom...?" *Uh-oh, she didn't guess a thing.*

I crawled out from my hiding spot and shook my head. I took a step toward her. "No, um...this is very difficult for me to tell you, but..."

"Ah, no. Elaina, you don't have to say a word. I understand." Her eyes were sparkling. "So this is my true power...!"

"Nope..."

You still don't understand a thing, do you?

"I know, I thought it was strange at first, too. But it didn't seem like a coincidence when I defeated the leader of the thieves, either. And this time, I fell with miraculous timing, almost as if someone had extended a helping hand, right? This is my magic. I know I'm not wrong."

"No, you're definitely wrong."

Totally wrong. Entirely off base. What do you even think magic is?

I shook my head. "Just now, you see, I used a spell—"

"Oh-hoh! Could you possibly be jealous of my magical talents? Hmm-humph!" The girl who had been on the verge of tears just a moment ago was nowhere to be found. In her place was the usual Sharon, earnestly wearing a smug expression. "Without even holding a wand, and with no intention of doing so, I instinctually cast spells. Surely that's how I defeated not only the thieves' leader, but these two lookouts as well, right?"

No, that's not right. That's totally inaccurate.

I've heard of delusions of grandeur, but this is ridiculous.

"Who knew I had such an ability...?"

The ability to escape reality?

"Listen, Sharon, just now, I—"

Once again, I tried to show her the error of her ways, tried to pull her out of her escapism, but her ears were no longer capable of hearing me.

"Look, Elaina." Wearing a triumphant expression, Sharon tossed her hair with a flourish. "Now that I know I can use magic, there's no need for me to hold

back. I can make quick work of this dejected den of thieves all by myself!”

“No, um—”

“All right! I’m off!”

“Um—”

“I guess you can wait here, then! Wait for my return after defeating the thieves!”

“.....”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Laughing loudly like some kind of broken toy, Sharon dashed into the cave. She didn’t even try to conceal herself. She was pumped full of misplaced confidence. It was practically spilling out of her.

“Ummm...”

My calls to her were in vain, and soon, she had disappeared from view.

.....

Maybe she hit her head too hard...?



“Wha...?! It’s the witch from before! She came to lay waste to our hideout—gah!” The man collapsed.

“Shit...! She’s really strong! Watch out, you guys—gah!” The man beside him collapsed.

“What’s with this woman...?! Is she a monster? Shit! Call for backup—aaah!” Even the man watching from a distance collapsed.

The men who faced off against Sharon fell over for no reason, one after another, as if their legs had been yanked from under them by some unseen force. Once they had fallen, they said, “Wh-what’s this...? I’m suddenly so sleepy...” before passing out.

Well, what do you suppose could be going on here? It’s almost like they were knocked over and put to sleep by magic.

Even as she watched the approaching thieves collapse one after another, Sharon still seemed to believe she was somehow causing it.

“Humph...you’re lucky I’m letting you off easy,” she said smugly, knocking down enemy after enemy as they approached.

Honestly, if she’s going to talk a big game, she could at least come up with some better one-liners...

Men appeared from the shadows, brandishing cudgels, only to fall unconscious before getting anywhere near her. One of the enemies seemed to realize that he couldn’t get close to her and threw his cudgel from a safe distance, but just before it hit her, it bounced off of some kind of mysterious force field and took the man out.

From up close or from afar, no attack could hit her.

There stood Sharon, completely invincible.

“.....”

Well...

What that means is that I was behind her, handling all the attacks that came at her. I knocked down each and every one of the men holding cudgels, then put them to sleep. And yet, Sharon still hadn’t so much as noticed my assistance.

Sharon had, as expected, taken center stage, while I took a backseat and provided support, and that’s how things had developed, but—

“All right, you all can come at me from any angle! I’ll take every last one of you down!” Sharon was definitely getting carried away.

“Kuh...we can’t get anywhere near her...!”

“We can’t win, no matter where we attack from...!”

The men recoiled from the fight.

“.....” I stood in the back, silent.

How has she not noticed me yet? It doesn’t make any sense and isn’t very satisfying.

I continued knocking down bandit after bandit, keeping a healthy distance between myself and Sharon as we advanced into the cave, but what I really

wanted to do was give the girl a good smack on the back of the head and tell her to dial it down a little.

“.....”

Inside was a strange sight. The cave was full of clothing—a huge number of garments obviously stolen from surrounding cities, in every make and style, from the lightest summer garb to the thickest winter wear, all of it strewn about in total disarray. There were even piles of underwear and shoes, as well as several stacks of fashion magazines.

It was a mystery.

The biggest mystery was that almost all these clothes had the tags removed, and they had all clearly been worn. Many garments were lying crumpled on the floor of the cave as if they had been stripped off and left where they lay.

I couldn't help but wonder why the bandits had hoarded all the clothing here. If they meant to resell the clothes, why had they already been worn, and what were they doing lying discarded in a cave? Actually, it wasn't clear why these half-naked brigands were collecting clothes at all.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! If you won't come attack me, maybe I'll come after you!”

“.....”

Even more of a mystery was Sharon's reckless behavior. When it wasn't clear whether the bandits were going to do anything, Sharon launched her own suicide attack.

“Eeek! She's terrifying!”

“Please, stop already! We surrender!”

“Somebody help!”

The thieves turned their backs on the approaching girl and tried to run for it, but they weren't able to escape her mighty spells.

“Guaaah!” One man tripped over nothing and fell right to sleep.

“Sh-shit! This—” One man tried to unleash a counterattack, but he, too, fell

asleep.

“E-eeek! Help—” Another man tried to flee but was put to sleep all the same.

I may be repeating myself, but all of this came to pass because I was pulling the strings from the shadows.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! No longer can anyone stop me!”

I’m sure I’m repeating myself, but all of this came to pass because I was pulling the strings from the shadows.

That part is important, so I said it twice.

“Shit... Damn yooouuu!”

The thieves were almost completely annihilated.

The last man standing, their leader, grabbed his gun and pointed it at Sharon—but immediately, the muzzle was frozen over with ice, and then he, too, was put to sleep.

And that was how Sharon defeated the bandits—a normal girl, who was only dressed as a witch.

“Humph...piece of cake.”

I know I’m repeating myself, but all of this came to pass because I was pulling the strings from the shadows.

“.....”

What is this strange empty feeling? I mean, everything worked out okay, right?

“I’m really amazing...!”

I wanted to smack her on the head immediately and tell her not to get carried away, but I didn’t want to risk damaging what little brains she had. I kept my fist in check and let out one long sigh.



After that, Sharon emerged from the cave, saying, “Elaina! As you can see, my powers made quick work of the gang! How about that? Hmm-humph!”

I fixed her with a thousand-yard stare more chilling than anything a dead fish could pull off. “Ohhh, is that so?” I replied. “Wooow, how amazing. You totally defeated them, didn’t you?”

Sharon’s enthusiasm would not be curbed. “Hmm-humph...this is it, my true power!”

The devil on my shoulder grinned wickedly and whispered to me, *“Wouldn’t it be interesting to show her the truth?”*

But the angel on my shoulder put a stop to that: *“You mustn’t! What do you think would happen to her if you did something like that?”* But even the angel of my conscience was ready to give up. *“That girl won’t believe anything we tell her anyway!”*

At any rate, Sharon led me into the cave and showed off the thieves whom I myself had put to sleep.

For the time being, we bound them up with rope. We tied every last one of them up, and as we were dragging them deep into the cave, all of them snapped awake, almost as if it had been planned that way.

The timing was such that it didn’t seem like a coincidence.

“Humph. I was just wishing they would open their eyes.”

Well, actually, I just dismissed the sleeping spell. But I’m already sick of this, so sure, you go with that explanation if you like.

As they awakened, the thieves soon recognized their situation and twisted their faces into grimaces.

“Wha...what is this...?!”

“Shit...we must have lost to her...”

“Do with us what you will...!”

“Huh? There’s one more witch...”

“Oh, there is.”

Of course, Sharon got all worked up again.

“Hmm-humph! I hold your very lives in my hand! How do you like it? How

does it feel to be utterly defeated by a witch?”

There was nothing the men could say in response to her words. It was clear that she was doing a good job antagonizing them, but they seemed to be enduring it.

To keep her from getting even more carried away, I held Sharon back with one hand and tossed out the question, “You, bandits! Why were you stealing clothes?”

But the men didn’t answer me right away. They looked back and forth, reluctantly whispering about who was going to tell me, then urging that someone hurry up and say something, nudging each other with their elbows.

After waiting for a few moments, the one who finally opened his mouth to speak was the thieves’ leader.

“...Because we don’t have any.”

Sharon and I cocked our heads in unison.

“Huh?”

“What was that?”

“Because we don’t have any clothes...,” the leader said, “to wear when we go buy clothes...”

Sharon and I looked at each other in confusion. Obviously, neither of us had any idea what that was supposed to mean.

“...Huh?”

“What are you saying?”

“Well, you see...we don’t have any clothes to wear when we go buy clothes.”

Once again, the thieves’ leader grumbled his excuse, explaining nothing. Sharon and I stared at him, entirely baffled by this new nonsense. Though, actually, considering that the whole group was wearing nothing but makeshift loincloths, I suppose he wasn’t lying.

The bandit leader hesitantly told us the story of their group bit by bit, blushing all the while as if he was incredibly embarrassed.

According to him:

The gang had formed out of a group of hopeless men from nearby towns who all had the distinct misfortune of being simultaneously poor, ugly, and unfashionable. Understandably, they had very low self-esteem, especially in the realm of appearances. Most of them had come to resent the very idea of fashion. No matter what they wore, no matter what they tried, they only felt irritated with themselves.

What's worse, when they tried to shop, predatory boutique staff would appear before them, saying things like, "Goodness me! Are you shopping for a certain look?" With sweet words, they would lure the men in, crowing, "This item should suit you quite well, sir! Won't you try it on?" Once they were dressed, the staff would come in for the kill, relentless despite the fact that the nearby mannequins looked much better wearing the garments. "Oh, that looks wonderful!" The men were sick and tired of it.

In the leader's opinion, his men weren't even qualified to visit boutiques. Once, he had stepped foot in a boutique wearing his own clothes and could practically hear the staff members' inner voices disparaging him. "*Huh? Did this guy really come into our shop dressed like that? Gross.*" It was probably an auditory hallucination, though.

In any case, these men wanted to buy good clothes, but they were caught in the contradiction of having no clothes with which to go buy clothes. As a result, for some time now, the brunt of their anger had been directed into a building resentment for the whole fashion industry, and they had gone on a crime spree, attacking boutiques and stealing clothes.

Which means...

In short...

It was just an ordinary case of misplaced resentment.

"But...no matter how much we stole and stole, it was never enough..." A single tear rolled down the bandit leader's cheek. "We didn't know what suited us...or even if they make clothes for awful men like us... That anxiety followed us around constantly, and ultimately, no matter how much we stole, we didn't want to wear any of it and just tied everything around our waists like

loincloths...”

So if nothing you put on suits you, it's better to go without clothes, is that it?

That explained why they had wound scraps of cloth around their waists, taken up their cudgels, and started stealing clothes, caveman-style. They weren't selling the stolen garments at all—as the huge piles of well-worn clothing and stacks of fashion magazines attested.

“I see.”

Sharon nodded after she had finished listening to the story.

And then, with another smug look, she said, “So in other words, if you all had clothes that suited you, you would never do something like this again, right?”

As she spoke, she looked deeper into the cave—at the piles of clothes that had been discarded there.

She looked just a little bit happy.

○

“Wow...we did a really good job, huh...?”

“That we did...”

Later that day, when we emerged from the cave, I had huge bags under my eyes.

We had discovered that these thieves were not hardened brigands. They were just a bunch of unhappy locals. In other words, if we solved their problem, the gang would disperse.

Earlier, Sharon had puffed out her chest and said, “All right, leave it to me! You're in good hands, boys!”

She had a plan.

“Elaina, you help me, too, okay?”

As she said this, she had started gathering up all of the clothes that were scattered around the cave.

“...What are you planning to do?”

Sharon piled everything she'd gathered up into a huge mountain of cloth and said, "I'm going to make clothes for them." She spoke calmly, as if it was no big deal. "I'm going to design the clothes, and then you can use magic to whip them up right away."

"....."

In other words, we were going to make custom clothing for all of these men who had otherwise stooped to half-naked thievery. If something didn't fit, we would resize it, and if anyone didn't have something great, we would create it using the piles of clothing in the cave as raw materials.

In doing so, Sharon would solve their problem.

"...I see."

I had no objections. It was a much more wholesome method than taking them down by force.

Anyway, we set up shop and churned out clothes for several dozen men.

The men, whose self-esteem had been badly damaged by cruel treatment at the hands of boutique staff, were uncertain at first. They stared at the clothes we made, questioning, "But...these clothes... Do they really suit me, I wonder...?"

However...

"Hey, hey, you jerks! There's no way an outfit coordinated by yours truly would look bad on you, got it?" Here, Sharon's peerless self-confidence was on full display. "The clothes I make are top-quality. You would know that if you looked at my robe, wouldn't you?"

I was extremely curious to know exactly where this confidence was welling up from, but for the time being, I decided to stay quiet and play along.

"And my magic is top-quality, too, so that means if you put on the clothes we make, you'll be ready to face any situation, without a doubt," I added, surprised to find that I was wearing the same triumphant expression as Sharon this time.

And so, the two of us made clothes for all the thieves, then went back to the city that had commissioned Sharon to hunt them down.

Coming out to meet us, in all our exhaustion, were the awfully excited citizens.

“Lady Sharon! Unbelievable, you came back...!”

“Did you defeat them?!”

“That’s our Sharon!”

“With Sharon around, we’ve got no one to fear!”

“Long live Miss Sharon!”

“Hooray!”

“Hooray!”

“Amazing! Somebody hold me!”

“Huh? Who’s that witch beside her...?”

“Hey, dummy, that’s Miss Sharon’s assistant, of course.”

“I see! That’s our Sharon!”

The noise made me want to plug my ears against the clamoring, but beside me, Sharon was sucking up all the energy from the people, and she suddenly regained her vigor.

“Hmm-humph! Well, a sorry bunch like that was nothing to me!”

She tossed her hair and gave them a triumphant smile.

Even with bags under her eyes, her powers of performance were inarguable.

“Wow! What an incredible result, Lady Sharon!” The overweight city official extended both hands to her in welcome. Politely, ever so politely, he then exchanged a handshake with her, and presented her with a great many gold coins. “This is your reward. Please take it.”

“Hmm-humph!” With a smile still pasted on her face, Sharon accepted the money. “Well, if you ever have another request for me, don’t hesitate to say so. I’ll always come to the rescue!”

“You’re only going to get wrapped up in more trouble if you say stupid things like that...,” I whispered quietly beside her.

To the two of us, the official said, “Ha-ha-ha! How reliable!” He laughed, his rotund belly shaking.

After that, he seemed to look past us, scanning left to right. “By the way...,” he asked, tilting his head inquisitively, “whatever happened to all the stolen clothing?”

“.....”

“.....”

Sharon and I both averted our eyes.



After that, we left the city together.

Having completed her obligations, Sharon was returning to her travels. I, too, had finished the troublesome business I had gotten caught up in, so like her, I intended to resume my journey, but...

After walking for a short while, around the time we lost sight of the city behind us, Sharon stopped and said, “I guess this is where we say good-bye, since I can’t ride on a broom.”

“.....”

Of course she couldn’t ride a broom. She didn’t actually have any magic, after all. Though I still hadn’t told her about all the help I’d given her back at the bandits’ cave. If I let her continue with her misunderstanding, it wouldn’t be good for her.

I had followed her lead and stopped walking, and I stood there silently for a bit.

And then...

“Thank you for today, Elaina,” Sharon said, pressing a parcel into my hands. “This is your reward.”

“.....?” I accepted the package, but I stared at it and cocked my head quizzically. “...What is this?”

“Open it.”

“.....”

I did as I was told and opened the package.

Inside was half of the gold she had received earlier from the city official.

That, and a white dress, a lovely one-piece garment that looked perfect for the coming summer season.

“In the cave, you were protecting me, weren’t you? This is my way of saying thanks.”

She spoke plainly.

“...You noticed?”

Sharon nodded in the affirmative.

“I know better than anyone that I’ve got no magical abilities.”

“.....”

“I know I can’t use magic, but for just a little bit, I felt like I was a real witch. So thank you for that.”

And here I was certain that she actually believed she had spontaneously developed magic...

“So you matched your movements to mine and pretended the whole time?”

With Sharon, it was always hard to tell if she was being serious or joking.

“Yep,” she replied, wearing a carefree smile. “Lying is part of my identity, after all.”

It was a smile very well-suited to a normal girl her age, much better than the smug look that had been plastered all over her face before.

“I think the way you look now is much more *you* than the version that lies and pretends to be a witch.” I returned her smile.

But Sharon snorted. “Humph! I’m afraid I can’t accept that advice.” That identity of hers was on full display. “You see, thanks to everything that happened, I like mages even more than before.”

“Which was that? A lie, or the truth?”

Sharon smiled at me impishly.

“Both.”



CHAPTER 3

Things Unseen

A letter was delivered to the palace of a certain country.

The sender was a witch—a young traveler known as the Ashen Witch.

A few days earlier, she had received a direct commission from His Majesty the King and had gone to visit the nearby Northern Woods. She had apparently sent back her report.

“Oh-hoh, that witch had a vacant look on her face the whole time she was listening to me talk, but she seems to take her job fairly seriously.”

They had made an arrangement that the king would pay money after the witch carried out his request. She had probably sent this letter as a progress report, telling the king that she was still on the job.

At least, that’s what the king thought until he cut open the sealing wax.

Greetings, Your Majesty.

Please pardon my abruptness as I cut to the chase.

One day has passed since I accepted the commission from your fine country.

Currently, there are two things that I can report to Your Majesty.

As the common saying goes, I have good news and bad news.

Which would you like to hear first? Oh, start with the good news? As you wish.

First, then, the good news.

I was able to find Elfriede and Louis, who left your country one year ago, without issue.

As your intelligence suggested, the two of them were living in a deserted village in the Northern Woods. Apparently, they’ve been lying low there ever since they left your country.

I was able to deliver Your Majesty’s message to them without incident.

That concludes the good news.

Well then, on to the bad news.

As for the two individuals whom you instructed me to locate...

I told them that Your Majesty wished to recall them to your country, and then

—

They died.

Both of them.



Sure enough, the forest known as the Northern Woods was located to the north of the capital.

It wasn't a particularly convoluted forest, just a bit wild and overgrown. If you looked up at the sky from beneath the trees, the partially blocked rays of the sun formed a pattern that seemed to waver back and forth. Now that winter was over and spring had arrived, the sunlight streamed down warmly.

I'd been given a map to the deserted village along with files on the two people I was meant to bring back with me, so there was no way to get lost.

If they're in the deserted village as the intelligence suggests—and if I haven't taken the wrong road—I should come face-to-face with them quite soon.

Then I stopped for a moment and looked over the files one more time.

Ahead of me, I could see the deserted village.

I could also see the figure of a single man walking toward me.

According to his file, his name was Louis.

His golden hair hung sleekly down to about his shoulders, and his delicate physique and diminutive stature made it difficult to tell at a glance whether he was a man or a woman. The fact that he was wearing an oddly frilly robe contributed to his outward appearance of androgyny, or ambiguous gender.

He was walking with unsteady, tottering steps, waving a long stick from left to right.

He certainly looks like the mage who used to work in that country. He matches

the description in all the documents...

He had been living here the whole time since leaving the country a year earlier.

“.....”

His unusual appearance was not the only thing remarkable about him.

Louis came quite close to me, then stopped, wearing a puzzled expression.

“...? Who is it? Is someone there?”

Sniffing at the air, Louis restlessly shook his head left and right. But his eyes never landed on me.

Louis was blind.

He couldn't see anything.

“Hello there.”

I called out to the man who was in the dark.

“Nice to meet you. I'm Elaina, a witch.” I carefully spoke the words I had prepared in advance. “Actually, I'm a traveler, but...do you live in that village over there?”

Then Louis said, “Huh? A traveler? Wow, how rare...!” Staring into empty space, he smiled broadly. “Do you perhaps have some business in the village up ahead?”

“...No, I got lost. I've been walking around looking for a place to stay.”

“Ah...well, this area is quite easy to get lost in, isn't it? I get lost sometimes, too... Though I get lost because I can't see where I'm going!”

“.....”

Louis didn't hesitate to make an awkward attempt at a joke.

“Oh, I'm sorry, didn't you notice? I can't see—”

“No, it's pretty obvious that you're blind.”

“I thought so. You can tell just by looking at me, right? Though I've got no idea what I look like, heh-heh!”

“Ah, um...I don't know how to respond to that...”

“Oh, sorry. I almost never have the opportunity to meet new people, living in a place like this, so... The only ones I have to talk to are my roommate and the carrier pigeons!” Louis said, chuckling and scratching his head with embarrassment.

He seemed to be a very, very cheerful individual.

“By the way, Elaina, you're lost, right? If you like, you can stay at my place. I'm living in a fairly spacious house right now, so if you want to rest, I think I can accommodate. You can even make it an extended stay if you feel the need.”

He was also apparently a very kind individual. At least, that was the impression he gave off.

“.....” After a brief silence, I asked, lowering my voice, “I'm grateful for the invitation, but...are you sure I won't be a bother to your roommate?”

“It's fine! My roommate doesn't like talking to people, other than me, of course. In fact, my roommate won't even go near strangers, so there's no problem!”

“By the way, may I know a bit...*more* about your roommate?”

“She's a girl.”

“...Is that all right?”

“Why wouldn't it be?”

“.....”

Are you sure I won't get stabbed or something?

I was suspicious, but since I had accepted the responsibility of this commission, I didn't have the option of running away now.

“...Well then, I'm grateful for the hospitality.”

There was nothing to do but prepare myself.

“Fantastic!” Louis said with a wide smile. “Okay, please come this way.”

And then he extended a hand toward the village and showed me the way.

“.....”

How much blood had been spilled by those hands...? It was a question I would rather not know the answer to.



I had been invited to the castle as soon as I reached that country.

Perhaps they had heard a rumor about me somewhere because a crowd of soldiers gathered around me and escorted me inside.

“There is something that we would very much like to ask you, Miss Traveling Witch. Please, you must attend us.”

I’m sure that to anyone watching this ostentatious spectacle, it looked like I was simply being dragged away by the authorities.

At the castle, the doughy king was waiting for me atop his throne.

“So you are the traveling witch, are you? There is something I would very much like to request of you.”

When we met face-to-face, the king looked down at me with cold eyes and snapped his fingers without breaking his gaze. Soldiers appeared from near the throne and pressed several sheets of paper into my hands. Apparently, the king had not the slightest intention of moving from his seat.

I see. I understand now how you swelled to such proportions.

“...What is this?”

I tilted my head in confusion.

The king told me, “I want to have you bring back two people who left this country one year ago.”

Included in the documents I had been handed were a map of the surrounding area and information on one man and one woman. There were written profiles on each of them, accompanied by photographs.

I looked over the documents as I flipped through them.

“The first one is Louis. He’s a blind mage.” The king began telling me about Louis in an indifferent tone.

“When he was small, he suffered from an illness of the eyes. He’s been blind ever since, although to compensate, his nose became much more sensitive. He’s smart, too. In my country’s most recent war, he wielded his power primarily behind the scenes.”

According to the king, Louis was also a master of poisons, and countless people had died by his hand.

Sometimes, he spread his poison throughout enemy countries. Other times, he would poison traitors. Yet other times, he would put his poisons to use as euthanasia for soldiers who were no longer useful.

Many, many people had been slain by his unique odorless and colorless poisons, which couldn’t be detected by any except Louis himself.

Apparently, he had a blood-soaked history that one would never imagine by looking at the photo of the gentle, androgynous face in his file.

“...So you’ve let such a dangerous individual live outside the country for a year?”

“It’s *because* he’s such a dangerous individual that we couldn’t let him remain within the country’s borders.” His Majesty cast his eyes downward as he spoke. “A year ago, the war ended. There was no longer a need for him to make poisons—but, as you’ll understand by taking a look at his deeds, he had committed many crimes against humanity. The people of my country unanimously shunned him, regardless of the fact that he was a war hero.”

“.....”

“And so, I gave him plenty of money to live on and exiled him. It must have been painful for him to have to stay in a place where he wasn’t wanted, after all.”

I assumed that the other person who had gone with Louis, a woman named Elfriede, had left the country under similar circumstances. Despite outstanding service to their nation, they were feared by their own countrymen, so I wasn’t surprised that they had been forced out.

However...

“So why are you trying to get them to come back again?”

In response to my overly naive question, the king answered readily. “Because we’re going to war again. You see,” he explained, “those two don’t belong anywhere but the battlefield.”



“I’m usually doing some sort of medicinal research, see, so I frequently enter the forest to collect wild plants.”

Louis walked in front of me, swinging his stick left and right like the pendulum on a clock.

Even if his eyes couldn’t see, his body seemed to remember the route. Taking steady steps along what amounted to a game trail running through the forest, he didn’t seem to hesitate.

“This forest is great. Almost all of the ingredients I need for the medicines I’m studying to make now are right here. The air is clean, and best of all, there’s no noise—it’s nice and quiet. I enjoy every day here.”

“What medicines are you studying now?” I asked.

“Ah, Elaina? Once we pass this fence, we’ll be in my village.”

I was sure I had asked a question, but maybe it didn’t make it to his ears. Louis tapped on the tattered fence with his walking stick. The sign that must have once had the name of the village inscribed on it was so wrapped up in ivy that the letters were illegible.

“Well, I say ‘my village,’ but it’s just an ordinary ghost town now.” He let out a quiet laugh.

“.....”

Sure enough, the village was abandoned, as promised.

The private homes that we passed were all slowly crumbling, the places that were once home to gardens were overrun with weeds, the pond was totally dried up, and I could see almost no signs of people living here.

But it hadn’t fallen completely into ruin. Neither did it show any signs of having been attacked by anyone. It looked as if, some number of years earlier,

the citizens of this village had simply vanished, all at once.

“Total population: two,” Louis added. “It’s just me and my roommate, Elfriede.” Louis continued tap-tapping his stick, swinging it back and forth as he spoke. “This village was abandoned quite a while ago, and no one really lives here any longer.”

“Where did the people who used to live here go?”

It looked as if a fair bit of time had passed since the village had been abandoned.

“Ah...,” Louis mumbled, as if he had just remembered something significant. “Apparently, everybody died.”

“...That’s...”

But why?

I almost asked the question.

“Oh, come to think of it!”

But just when I was about to open my mouth, at exactly the wrong moment, Louis clapped his hands as if he had suddenly remembered something else and turned around to face me.

“Elaina. I forgot to tell you one thing.” Staring off into the space behind me, Louis said, “It’s about my roommate, Elfriede. I don’t want to say too much, but if you can, please try to avoid staring.”

“.....” After a brief silence, I tilted my head and asked, “Why?”

He answered, “You’ll know once you see her.”

And then, we finally arrived at his house.



“As for Elfriede—the other person who left our country one year ago—she’s the one you need to be especially careful around.”

The king spoke in a torrent. “Unlike Louis, who did his work in the shadows, that woman’s power really shone on the battlefield. I put her out on the field for one moment, and the strength of the opposing army immediately crumbled.

There probably isn't another person alive as strong and terrifying as that woman."

"....."

Flipping through the materials I'd been given, I came to a photograph and a file on a single woman.

She was an adult woman with green hair that just about reached her shoulders. She was wearing a gloomy expression and had her eyes cast downward. She wore only a simple robe and plain clothing.

At first glance, there didn't seem to be anything terrifying about her. I thought it looked like a photo of a normal mage.

On top of that, there was even a caption on the photo: "EXCELS AT THE ART OF HEALING MAGIC." In fact, it went on to conclude, "HAS NEVER ONCE USED AN ATTACK SPELL. LIKELY INCAPABLE OF DOING SO."

What on earth could he mean, saying that this mage shone on the field of battle? Like, she went around healing all the injured soldiers?

But if that was the case, it would be hard to believe that she was feared by the citizens and forced to leave the country.

"What kind of powers does she have?"

I tilted my head questioningly, and the king replied, "Take a look at the next photo and see for yourself."

I did as I was told and flipped past the first photo. Apparently, there had been two.

"....."

There, in the second one, was Elfriede, standing in the center of a battlefield, facing away from the camera. She was not holding a wand.

Around Elfriede were arranged several stone statues shaped like soldiers.

"Elfriede has the ability to turn anyone who meets her eyes into stone."

The king continued, "That woman possesses a terrible power that frightens even witches."

So she was feared for turning every last enemy on the battlefield into stone.
“That’s why I had to be especially careful.”



“Okay, come on in! This is my house!”

“Uh, ah...thanks...”

I did as Louis urged and stepped through the door into his house. Though this was a deserted village, the interior was in pretty good shape, and he had arranged a minimum of furniture and fixtures so that it looked like an ordinary house.

If I had to point out something that was different from houses elsewhere, I would have to mention the way that suspicious potions and mysterious documents were casually scattered over the dining room table. That, and the fact that Louis had a roommate who could change people into stone.

“Ah, Louis! Welcome ho—”

As I was gazing absently around at the interior of the house, a woman with green hair appeared suddenly, bounding into the room.

Right, she must be...

“Wh-who is this outsider?!”

.....

She had hidden herself again the moment she saw me, but from the brief glimpse I had gotten of her, she appeared to be exactly the same Elfriede I had seen in the photos.

“You brought a woman into our house... Adulterer...! Louis, you...adulterer...!”

...Though she gives off an entirely different impression than her photograph...

Growling from her hiding place, she seemed just like a wild animal that bore its teeth in hostility toward humans.

“How cruel when you have me! So you *do* prefer younger girls? You’re the worst!”



I feel like the woman I saw in the photos had a bit of a listless air to her, but this...?

“Ah, sorry, Elfriede.” Unlike Elfriede, who never let her guard down for a second, Louis was as nonchalant as could be. “This person is the traveling witch Elaina. She got lost, so I want you to let her stay here.”

“Stay...? Did you say ‘stay’?” From her prickly tone of voice, it was clear that Elfriede was not a fan of the idea. “No way, Louis. We can’t let people stay here in these times...”

Oh, I knew it.

“You say that, but if she can’t stay here, she’ll be in a bind and have to sleep outdoors. We must help others when in need!” Louis soothed Elfriede a little, then closed the door to the house.

With a *bang*, my path of retreat was closed off.

Ultimately, Louis persuaded Elfriede, and I ended up staying.

“Louis, I’m against this. No matter what you say, I won’t hear it.”

“Oh? But what could possibly be wrong? There’s really nothing to worry about.”

“The truth is, I have a witch allergy...”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Whenever I’m near a witch, I can’t stop feeling nauseated.”

“You never get close to anyone anyway, so there’s no problem!”

“.....”

“.....”

Well, he didn’t persuade her, exactly. It was more like he just brushed off her complaints.



That evening, I was treated to Louis’s home cooking. As their home was located deep inside a forest, the dinner table was laden with wild greens and

mushrooms and the like. There was no meat. There was no bread, either.

Chewing a mouthful of salad, Louis said, "Sorry about this. If we had known a guest was coming, I'm sure we could have prepared something a little more substantial, but these are the only kinds of foods we have here." He smiled. "I do my best, though. I mean, I'm in charge of making dinner, and I can't see!"

"....."

Was that supposed to be a joke?

"Maybe I made a mistake and used poisonous mushrooms instead of normal ones!"

"....."

I guess that was supposed to be a joke?!

"Um, actually...I'm not sure if I can eat this..."

"Oh, sorry! Did I not cook them all the way through? As you might expect, when you can't see, it's hard to adjust the temperature, so..."

"No, that's not what I mean."

"Oh, perhaps you don't like mushrooms?"

"No, that's not what I mean."

"Well then, what do you mean?"

"I have no idea how I'm supposed to react... Is it okay to laugh?"

I couldn't hide my bewilderment at Louis's ever-cheerful demeanor, especially now that I knew a little bit about his and Elfriede's pasts.

"Louis has always been like that," Elfriede added from her place beside him at the table.

Shortly thereafter, Louis set his fork down with a clatter and answered, "Well, if I don't act like this, the people around me are too reserved! You know, I'm not really bothered by the fact that I'm blind. I certainly haven't led the best life, but looking at the way things are right now, I can only conclude that it's all been worth it."

“I’m sure you’re right.” Elfriede nodded slightly beside him. “And you always seem to enjoy your research into new medicines, Louis.”

“That I do.” Louis went back to munching on his salad.

“...Though you never tell me what kind of research you’re working on.” Elfriede had some very biting words for him.

“If I tell you, will you tell me what spells you’re working on now, Elfriede?”

“I’ll tell you if you tell me, Louis.”

“No, you tell me first.”

“No, no, you first.”

“No, you.”

Sitting across from the two of them when they started to have this pointless back-and-forth, all I could do was let out a sigh.

Could these two love-addled sweethearts actually be feared and hated in their homeland?

“Generally, I’m always mixing medicines in my room, so if you want to know that badly, you can go into my room and take a look. I doubt you’ll understand what anything is, though.”

“And if you want to know what I’m working on, you can look in my research materials, can’t you? I’m always writing my documents in the living room, so you can take a look any time you like!”

“Wait, but I can’t see!”

“And I can’t mix potions just by smell!”

As the two of them continued shouting at each other, I noticed Elfriede looking Louis in the eyes and Louis grabbing Elfriede’s hand to confirm where she was. In contrast to their forceful words, these gestures were something normal sweethearts would do.

“Um...”

I interrupted their lovers’ quarrel.

“Ah, I’m sorry! What is it, Elaina?”

Louis lent me his ear with a smile.

“.....”

Elfriede turned away. She probably did it to be considerate and avoid inadvertently making eye contact. Or maybe she was simply embarrassed.

I stared directly at the two of them—and coughed once, clearing my throat apprehensively, then asked, “Why are the two of you living in a place like this?”

Louis answered, not seeming particularly interested. “...Ah, come to think of it—I haven’t told you about that yet, have I, Elaina?” He continued, wearing an amiable smile, “The truth is, Elfriede and I used to live in a nearby country—”

It was a story I already knew.

And it was the truthful version, as told by the people who lived it.

Louis had been quite young when he had lost his sight, but by that time, he’d already developed certain abilities as a mage.

He was also skilled at mixing magic medicines and could even identify them by smell.

And so, when he lost his sight, he did not sink into despair. On the contrary, he’d known for a long time what was going to happen, as the disease claimed his eyesight little by little, he told me.

By the time he lost his sight completely, he had learned how to live on his own. His specialty was making magic medicines, so he was able to earn a certain living, and he could use other kinds of magic as well, so he experienced little discomfort in his daily life.

After losing his sight, he ran a drugstore in a quiet corner of the country for a long time.

Then one day, something happened.

A state official appeared before Louis and commissioned him for a job.

To state the substance of the job plainly...

“We want you to make poisons to euthanize livestock.”

That's what it was. According to the official, the old methods of culling livestock were too inhumane, so the state wanted to move to performing euthanasia with poison instead.

For that purpose, Louis was requested to create a poison that was odorless and colorless, and that would absolutely not remain in the body after death.

"Oh, no...I couldn't possibly..."

Honestly, Louis was not interested in accepting such a commission. He didn't like killing. However, if there was a way to kill without causing suffering, he felt obliged to ascertain whether poison would be an effective method.

In the end, he decided to accept the commission.

The potion was soon finished, and a supplementary commission was made for its mass production.

"Wow! This is fantastic, Master Louis! Thanks to you, the people against euthanasia can finally stop complaining."

"...Is that so? That's great." Louis was not particularly thrilled. *"But is this large quantity really necessary? I feel as if I've already made plenty..."*

"No, no. Recently, a pestilence has been going around among livestock herds, and no matter how much poison we have, it's never enough."

"....."

Though he suddenly felt even more uncomfortable, Louis continued making his special poison.

It was only several years later that he found out the poison hadn't been used on livestock at all.

Louis's poison had been spread widely throughout neighboring countries and villages—to kill people.

Elfriede had been born into a lineage of mages, but she told me that, for as long as she could remember, she had been disinherited from her family.

That was wholly due to the power residing in her eyes.

As for how long her eyes had been this way, or why on earth that kind of

power dwelled within them, no one—not even Elfriede herself—could say. Even when she was a child, people had been afraid of the power of her eyes.

“You bring shame to our family. Hurry up and leave.”

There wasn't a single relative who would accept her with her strange power.

After she was kicked out, Elfriede was on her own, and she started living on the streets. At her young age, homelessness hit hard. She begged for change and occasionally swiped food from roadside stalls.

But she never once intentionally used the power in her eyes. It was painfully clear that she had been driven from her home because of that power.

“Once more...once more, I want to return to my family...”

She lived through each day with that wish in her heart. She learned healing magic and figured out how to cure anyone she accidentally petrified.

She wasn't able to use her healing magic to cure herself of her cursed gaze, but even so, she had been able to find a coping mechanism.

“Now that I can do this, I can probably return home...”

Or so she thought.

But her family still rejected her.

“So you've figured out a way to cure the people you turn to stone. What of it?”

“Weren't you disowned a long time ago? Don't come back.”

“You hear that? We don't want to see you ever again, you monster.”

There was no way they were going to accept her. Even though she had taught herself how to use magic, still, anyone who made eye contact with her would be turned to stone.

It seemed only natural that no one would want to get close to her.

After that, she had no other choice but to continue living alone. She lived quietly, trying her best not to make eye contact with anyone. But it's not possible to avoid eye contact forever. She would sometimes accidentally meet someone's eyes and then have to apply a healing spell to turn them back to normal after they were petrified. And every time that happened, she faced

another cruel rejection. Eventually, no one would even come near her. She was cursed at, shunned, and told to leave the country. Hers was a lonely existence.

Then one day, something happened.

“You’ve got the power to turn anyone who meets your gaze into stone, yes?” a country government official called out to her. *“If you’re interested, there’s a job that we would very much like you to do. How about it?”*

And then the official took her to the battlefield.

“We want you to turn the enemy soldiers to stone.”

Ultimately, that was how she ended up standing on the front lines of the battlefield.

Then Elfriede, who had spent her entire life rejecting her curse, refused.

“No way! I don’t want to use my power for something like this!”

But she didn’t have the right to resist. The moment she had been brought to the battlefield—from the moment her eyes had been enlisted as weapons of war—there was no way she could simply go back home.

Against her will, she was tied up by soldiers from her own country, carried in front of the enemy, and forced to open her eyes. Though she cried and screamed, no one came to her rescue.

She suffered, alone, in the middle of the battlefield.

Until the day the war ended.

After the war was over, His Majesty the King summoned Louis and Elfriede to the palace and handed each of them a large sum of gold.

“I’d like you to take this gold and find a new country to live in.”

One of them was a fiendish killer who had brought about the deaths of a great many people with his odorless, colorless poisons. The other was a mage who had mercilessly turned entire battalions of enemy soldiers to stone.

After the war, all anyone felt toward them was fear.

Anxiety was flooding the country, as people wondered when the two of them might turn on their countrymen and whether their dangerous powers might be

directed at the citizenry.

So they were told to leave.

It was all too convenient. Not a single person showed any concern for the two of them.

"In short, we've served our purpose, so we're banished?" Louis asked bitterly.

"....." Elfriede didn't say a word. She just took the money.

Ultimately, the two of them left the country.

That was the only option left for them.

"Hey, you. Is this the way to the Northern Woods?"

Standing in front of the gate that had just been slammed shut behind them, Louis tapped gently on Elfriede's shoulder.

"....." Elfriede nodded.

"Hmm? Sorry, I'm blind. Were you nodding just then?"

"...That's correct. That's the way to the wood."

"All right. And your name is?"

"...Elfriede."

"I see. Thank you, Elfriede."

He stared in Elfriede's direction and smiled cheerfully. That was an expression that no one had ever directed toward her before.

And...

For the first time since her birth, here was a person she couldn't turn to stone.

"See ya!"

Louis started walking, swinging his stick as he went.

There was no hesitation in his steps. In the Northern Woods, there was nothing but a deserted village that all the people had already left. He must have been planning to live there in the forest all alone—Elfriede didn't have to think

about it too hard to understand as much.

“.....”

Elfriede told me that she spontaneously chased after him. For the first time since she was born, she had met a person who didn't turn to stone when she made eye contact with him. She had found someone she could live with.

After walking for a moment or two, Louis stopped short.

“Elfriede, would you possibly be standing behind me right now?”

He must have heard her footsteps. He had asked the question without turning around.

Elfriede was quite flustered. She realized that she must have come across like some kind of stalker or something.

“...I-I'm sorry. Um...” She made her excuses in a feverish haste, with wild gestures, but of course, Louis could see none of it.

Her agitation didn't make it through to him, and with an extremely calm demeanor, Louis turned around.

“Perhaps you're coming with me?”

“.....!” Elfriede nodded excitedly. *“Y-yes...I'll go!”* She hurried over to his side.

“All right. Well, let's go.”

Then he started walking again.

Ever since that day, the two of them had been living in this village, Louis told me.

“Now the two of us live here without issue. I daresay we're both much happier than when we were living in that country.”

Here, they weren't being used by others or forced to be complicit in evil deeds. Compared to what they had been through, living in a deserted village must have seemed like paradise.

“By the way...” Louis crossed his arms and spoke in a low voice. “Recently, there have been signs that the surrounding countries are planning to launch attacks against our former home.”

Taking over for him, Elfriede kept her eyes cast downward and said, “For the past several weeks, we have received many letters asking us to return to that country. They said war is breaking out again, so they need our powers.”

“.....”

“Of course, we’ve been ignoring them. We have no intention of giving up our life here.”

She looked like her intentions were firm.

But letters would probably keep coming, so long as they stayed here. Over and over, they would receive requests to return to their country.

“...Suppose someone from your country was to come here directly... If someone like that appeared before you, what would you do?”

Louis tilted his head for a moment, like he was thinking. “I wonder...,” he said, then, “If it was someone we could have a conversation with, I would resolve it by talking to them.”

“And if it’s someone who talking didn’t work on?”

He smiled at my question.

“Let me see. I would probably feed all three of us poison and kill everyone, including the visitor.”

I couldn’t tell whether he was joking or being serious.

But for now, there was just one thing I could say.

“...I’m not sure I can eat this...”

“Just a little joke. Please don’t let it bother you.”

Louis seemed unconcerned.

But Elfriede, who had been seated beside him the whole time with her eyes cast downward so as not to make eye contact with me, looked concerned.

Her eyes were focused directly in front of me—on the plate from which I had taken not a single bite.

A short while later, after we had finished our meal, Louis said, “Well, I’m

working on my medical research, so please excuse me,” and closed himself up in his room. “Oh, and Elaina, please relax and make yourself at home, okay?”

He didn't fail to extend this consideration before disappearing.

But...

“.....”

“.....”

Does he really think I'll be able to take it easy with Elfriede sitting right next to me? There's no way!

Strange silence and a heavy feeling of tension dominated the room. It was hard to believe that the atmosphere had gotten this oppressive just with the absence of the carefree Louis.

Several minutes passed, and both of us remained silent. Then finally, Elfriede opened her mouth.

“Right now, if I looked you in the eye, you would turn to stone, and there would be no returning you to normal.”

Her calm tone of voice was a bit of a mismatch for her frightening words.

There would be no returning to normal. In other words, she had no intention of turning me back.

“Is that a threat?”

“No.” Elfriede shook her head slowly. “I just want to ask you one question.”

“.....”

I was silent, waiting for her to speak again.

Elfriede sucked in a breath and sighed, then said, “You're a mage sent by that country to come here and bring us back. Am I wrong?”

She thrust the truth straight at me.



“You may be able to fool sweet, innocent Louis, but you can't fool me, Elaina.”

Her tone was pointed as she cross-examined me.

“.....”

But I didn't answer her. I was simply silent.

“I'll take your silence as confirmation.”

“Do whatever you want.”

I didn't really care how she perceived my reaction.

In response, Elfriede let out a single sigh, then said, “I was certain they were going to come take us back by force soon... But I never thought they would send a traveling witch to do the job.”

“...I'm sure you didn't.”

“Elaina. You're planning to take us from here back to that country, aren't you?”

“.....”

I didn't answer.

But she kept talking anyway.

“As you heard in our story earlier, both Louis and I love our lives here in this village. We have no intention of leaving.”

That was painfully clear just from watching the way the two of them behaved. For these two people, who had never belonged anywhere, this village was the only place they could relax.

“...But I know that you are under orders to bring us back. The king takes no issue with committing crimes against humanity, so...”

She bit her lip.

She tightly grasped some sheets of paper that were sitting on the table.

“Elaina. There's something I must ask of you. Please, please, I beg you...give us just a few more days.”

“...Is something happening in a few days?”

Elfriede nodded and lowered her gaze to the rustling sheets of paper.

“My research will be complete.”

She had been researching a new spell and keeping it a secret from Louis.

She must have wanted me to wait until it was finished.

“What will you do with it once it’s complete?”

“Strip away Louis’s magic,” she answered plainly, “and restore his sight.”

“.....”

In other words...

“He will become an ordinary man, who can’t make poisons or anything.”

That’s what she was after.

Elfriede had probably been conducting this research ever since the letters started arriving, or maybe even before then.

Louis, a mage who excelled at brewing poison. The king only wanted him for his special talents. That meant that if he lost the ability to use magic, he wouldn’t be worth anything anymore. That was the idea.

Elfriede bowed very, very deeply and said, “I don’t care what happens to me. If they want to use my eyes again, that doesn’t bother me. I’ve long accepted my fate. So please, I’m begging you. Please, just leave him out of it. Don’t drag the most important person in my life off to war again...”

She was trying to tell me that she wanted to save him, and him alone, no matter what happened to her.

That was a very pure and admirable sentiment.

However.

“Unfortunately,” I said, “I’m afraid I can’t grant your wish.”



“What kind of person is Elfriede?” I asked Louis as we walked through the deserted village to their dwelling.

I had read her file, so I already knew a bit about her, but over the course of our conversation, I ended up asking about her anyway.

“She’s the person I love most in this world.”

“No, I meant to ask, like, how’s her temperament...?”

You were certainly ready to gush over her, though, weren’t you?

“Her temperament? Um...she’s got a great personality, and she’s a cheerful, kind person...”

“...What’s with that noncommittal answer?”

I feel like you could describe just about anyone you like that way...

“Well, I can’t see anything, so I really don’t know anything about her external characteristics.” Louis wore an easy smile as he spoke. “The only thing I do know is that her eyes are sick in a different way than mine.”

“And that would be...?”

“You’ll understand when you see her.”

Louis dodged the question with an ambiguous answer.

Though of course, since I had already read the file on Elfriede, I didn’t need him to go out of his way to explain it again. I was fully aware of the danger of her eyes.

Then Louis turned around to face me and said, “Elaina. Would you please wait just a few days?”

“...What are you talking about?”

“You are a witch sent here by our homeland. Am I wrong?”

My secret was out.

Though it was pretty unlikely that a traveler would deliberately come all the way out to a place as remote as this, so I had figured I would probably be found out before too long, but...

“Well, it’s more or less as you suspect.” I didn’t try to deny it. “I am a witch who was asked by the king of the country in question to bring the two of you back. By the way, if anything happens to me, it sounds like he’s going to try again. With force.”

His Majesty seemed to want the two of them back no matter the cost.

He was probably going to chase them down until he got his wish.

...It did make me wonder what was wrong with the country, that losing just two people could cause such a crisis.

“Force, huh? I suppose he’ll send soldiers after us, then?” Louis let out a quiet laugh, like it was all a joke. “But even so, I’d like you to wait a few days, Elaina.”

“...Why is that?”

I tilted my head questioningly, and Louis said, “Right now, I’m working on a new medicine. One that will cure the disorder of her eyes.”

“.....”

“A few days from now, I’ll be able to fix her eyes. I’ve already completed the potion that will turn her into a normal mage.”

After a short pause, he continued, “Do you think you could let Elfriede escape? I don’t care what happens to me. So please, I’m begging you.”

So at the end of the day, that’s what I was dealing with. It would be impossible to grant both their requests. And anyway, I’m not really into helping people sacrifice themselves.



I’m a fairly impatient individual, so even though they asked me to wait a few days, I couldn’t stand to just sit around doing nothing.

“Louis. Your mixture is slightly off. Look, there’s too much of one ingredient.”

And so, to make the days go by faster, I was, for example, helping Louis with his research, or— “Elfriede. You don’t have enough magical energy to use this spell. If you perform it, then even if his eyesight does come back, he won’t be able to see clearly.”

Or helping Elfriede with her spell research, as presumptuous as that was.

I also—

“...Should I write a letter or something?”

I wrote a letter and sent it off to the king, anticipating what was to come.

In the letter, I reported that Louis and Elfriede had died.

In the end, that was all I was able to do.

And then, the following day...

Both Elfriede's spell and Louis's potion were complete, and there was no longer a part left for me to play.

"...Elaina, could we get you to stay just a little bit longer? We haven't been able to properly thank you yet..." Louis frowned, looking off somewhere far away from me.

Both of them had finished their respective projects, and all that was left was for each of them to give the other the final results. I had figured it was time to take my leave.

"Oh, no, I don't want to intrude on you two any longer. I'm the kind of person who knows how to read the room."

Besides, it was sure to be awkward if I was around the first time they ever faced each other with their new eyes.

And most importantly, I did not want to have to stand there and watch them get all lovey-dovey.

"In that case, we'd at least like you to accept some money." With prickly words, Elfriede pressed a bag full of gold coins into my hands.

I pushed it right back at her.

"I don't need it."

"How come?"

"After this, you two will need to get out of this forest, right? I'm not the kind of person who would snatch away the cash you need to start your new life in a new country."

"....."

Elfriede puffed out her cheeks in displeasure. "No way. Elaina, I'll never be satisfied if I can't get you to take this money."

"Oh, come on, I just said I don't need it..."

“No, you must.”

“No, I can’t.”

“.....”

“.....”

Eventually, after we spent several minutes pushing the money back and forth between us— “Oh, enough of this! I understand. Fine, fine. If I take this, you’ll be satisfied, right? Just to be clear, I really don’t need it...” With much sulking, I agreed to a compromise: I would accept a single gold coin. Usually, I would have taken all the money, but this was a special case.

“What are you planning to do after this, Elaina?”

After our quarrel was over, Louis asked this one question with his usual nonchalant attitude.

Of course, I replied, “Isn’t it obvious? I’ll return to my travels.” *And so.* “It’s possible that I might meet the two of you again somewhere.”

We were all heading out. Me to return to my travels, and the two of them to begin a journey to find themselves a new hometown.

Thinking that I might like to see them again if the chance arose, I opened the door to leave their house.

Louis, gazing at my back, smiled and said in parting, “The next time we see each other, it will be for the first time.”

And so, the evil mage who turned people to stone with a glance and the mage who produced odorless, colorless poisons disappeared from this world.

From now on, they would just be two people, tied together with invisible strings.



CHAPTER 4

Of Statues and Witches

[The Cases of the Charcoal Witch and the Ashen Witch]

“Recently, it seems the statue of the goddess that is the symbol of our city has grown old and worn, so we would like you to repair it.”

It was about a week ago when that commission came in from the United Magic Association.

Perpetually plagued by a lack of money, I was extremely interested. *“Huh? You’ll pay me just to polish up some old statue? That’s the easiest job ever! Whoo-hoo!”* I set out for the city at once.

It was a strange place, well known as a city that professed to love history.

“Welcome and good day to you, Lady Witch. Please follow me.”

Appropriate for a city that loved history, they seemed to have the custom of dressing in historical garb, and even though it was midsummer and the hottest part of the year, the (female) official who showed me around, as well as every other person we passed in town, without exception, was wearing thick, long-sleeved clothes. I could only hope that they took as good care of themselves as they did of preserving history.

“Recently, here in our city, the young people’s loss of interest in plaster statues has become a serious concern...”

As she opened the doors to the library of historical records with a frown, the official looked to me like she could still quite easily pass as one of those *young people*. I felt like it was too early for her to be grumbling about “kids these days” and so on.

What does “loss of interest in plaster statues” mean anyway...?

“When I was young, we would cuddle plaster busts as we went to sleep, and gossip about how cool or cute the statues were, and even go on dates with plaster sweethearts. We were right in the middle of a fad for plaster girls and

plaster boys.”

“What kinda place is this? Is the whole city full of weirdos?”

“In our day, that was how everyone did things.”

“Huh...”

“But times have changed... These days, even if we do get a visitor to the library, there’s hardly anyone who goes out of their way to visit the statue corner... We want to bring back those golden years... Those times were really wonderful...”

As she reminisced, the official’s eyes filled with nostalgia, like a city girl remembering her family home in the country.

“Back then, you could make easy money just by selling plaster...”

“.....”

Ah, I was wrong, those are just the eyes of someone obsessed with money. If I’m not mistaken, she’s not concerned with getting back the liveliness of the past so much as returning to the era of easy money.

This was about the point when I realized that.

“During the plaster boom, if you said, ‘Yes! This is the same plaster that was used to make the statue of the goddess!’ someone would go ahead and buy it. But now, stuff like that doesn’t sell at all.”

“Did you really say ‘plaster boom’?”

Just think, making a fortune selling plaster... Was there actually that much of a demand for the stuff? Maybe this place really is full of crazy people.

“And now all the young people like paintings instead of plaster.”

“Doesn’t that just mean all the crazies switched from plaster to paintings?”

“Yes. But the painting boom is almost in decline now... We need to create a new trend...”

“.....”

Trends are like food, in that people tend to constantly want to take in

something new. Sooner or later, they get bored of eating the same thing day after day. So you have to mix things up every now and again.

“So you want to resurrect an old trend, yeah?”

“Yes. And I’m asking for your help, Lady Witch. Though I do stand to make a tidy profit, I also care deeply about the future of plaster busts and want to return them to their former glory.”

“I mean...you’re paying me, so I’m in, but...geez, lady...”

I was mumbling this as we arrived at the aforementioned statue corner.

“This is the one that I would like you to fix, Lady Witch.”

There, in one corner of the renowned library of historical records, the most popular institution in the center of town, loomed a plaster statue.

“.....”

It must have been extremely beautiful once.

Now, no trace of that beauty remained. There were cracks throughout the plaster face and arms, and what once must have been a beautiful white color was now dull and dirty. The wings that extended from the shoulders had retained their lovely shape, but the face and arms looked like they belonged to a different statue entirely.

The statue was probably modeled after a beautiful woman, but over time, it had degraded to such a state that you would be hard-pressed to even call it pretty. The main problems were that the face and arms had become rough, so the scraps of cloth it was dressed in looked like servants’ rags. The wings sprouting from its back also looked dirty. Finally, the lance that it was gripping in its hand looked like some cheap thing someone had found in the bargain bin at the local weapons shop.

I see, so this is...

“This is the statue of a goddess that was given to us by a neighboring city when we established this library of historical records. Back then, it was incredibly beautiful, and a lot of people came here just to see the statue, even from far away, but...now no one shows any interest in it.”

“.....”

I stared at the statue.

It had a face that I had seen somewhere before. Maybe because the plaster was a dull off-white—the color of ash. The ash-colored hair reminded me of a certain witch whom I love and respect.

The longer I looked at it, the more I thought its face resembled hers. It was the spitting image. Could she possibly have served as the model? It was enough to make me wonder.

A nearby sign indicated that the statue had been given to the library about twenty years ago, so it must have been based on a different person, but...

“.....”

Taking a long, hard look at the plaster statue, I said, “But it’s really seen better days, huh...? The skin is especially awful. It’s all rough.”

“Well, it *is* a statue, so it’s not actually skin...,” the official replied to me, quite exasperated. “Anyway, I’d like to request that you perform the repairs to this statue, Lady Witch. It is possible?”

“Oh-hoh-hoh, leave it to me! I may not look like it, but I’ve been called the Magician of Plaster Repairs, you know. It’s more than possible. Do you have any special requests? I’m going to return it to perfection!”

It was all lies, though.

However, the official answered in a lively voice. “Well! That is reassuring. In that case, I’d like to request that you somehow make this statue of the goddess look like the day she was born.”

“Understood. So I should cast off these rags and make her nude, right? Leave it to me.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Well then, what did you mean?”

“I want you to make her look new again.”

“I see. So in other words, she needs a skin care regimen! Leave it to me.”

“Skin...? Um, well, sure.”

The official nodded at me, looking like this was all very bothersome.



At any rate...

In this way, the curtain rose on my dramatic statue restoration story.



“...I see. I understand the situation.”

I stood nodding in front of a plaster statue that had apparently been repaired several days earlier.

“In short, you’re in a bind because the witch who came to your city before me messed around carelessly with your statue and ended up leaving it looking like... this?”

“That’s exactly it.”

The official nodded as I stared at the plaster statue.

Unfortunately, I had no way of knowing what the statue looked like before, so it wasn’t entirely clear just what had happened to bring about its current condition.

But it was pretty obvious that certain modifications had been added after the fact.

Starting with the clothes—it was a statue of a goddess, but for some reason, it was dressed in a robe. Additionally, it was wearing a triangular hat.

Its hair was long and of an indeterminate color, since it was made of plaster, but it was likely meant to be ash-colored. It had a familiar face, the face of a girl in her late teens. She was quite pretty, I must say. I’m sure anyone who saw the statue thought so.

By the way, this girl, this statue, this monument to grace and beauty, who was she?

That’s right, she was me.

“.....”

Obviously, the deed must have been done by someone quite familiar with my face.

I won’t name names, but I’m sure she was probably a young girl with black

hair, dressed in a black robe, and wearing a black triangular hat. That's definitely the impression that I'm getting. It's the only possibility.

"As you can see, the statue has completely changed... We can't possibly display it like this."

The official was distraught.

"I see..." I nodded solemnly. "Far from returning the statue to its original appearance, the other witch made it so cute that it looks like it might ascend straight to heaven, huh...? Well then, so what you want to tell me...is that you're afraid the statue might get stolen and war will break out?"

"Incorrect."

"It would be more appropriate to call her an angel rather than a goddess, right? Let's give her a name change."

"No way."

"...How did she come to have this sort of appearance in the first place?"

"I originally asked to have her repaired, but the Charcoal Witch who performed the repairs said, 'Somehow, my emotions got the better of me after I saw the statue,' and made her many 'improvements,' and so she ended up like this."

"I see. What an awful person."

"While she was at it, she kept insisting that, 'In my mind, this is how a goddess ought to look.'"

"No doubt about it, she must be terrible."

Apparently, this unfortunate city had been visited by a crazy person. Which also meant that I had allowed myself to become friends with a crazy person.

The official turned to face me.

"Please do something, Madam Witch. It's so hard for us to have her on display looking like this. Could I please get you to restore her somehow?"

She bowed deeply.

"....."

Well, restoring a plaster statue to its original state shouldn't be any trouble for a witch, but...

I stared hard at this statue that so closely resembled me.

"This statue is very important to our country," said the official beside me. "It was gifted to us by another city at the founding of this library of historical records, so..."

The official explained the history of the statue to me as if she had memorized exactly what was written on the placard on the base.

"Long ago, we were able to make quite a lot of money with this statue... That's what I want to try to do this time around as well. But if it looks like this... you see the problem?"

"....."

Her explanation slipped into vulgar speculation, but I let it pass as best I could.

And then, after the official had finished telling me about her passionate well of feelings for the statue (and about her fixation on money), I had a realization.

"...Can I ask you one thing?"

I turned to look at the official, and she tilted her head.

"You—no, everyone in this history-loving city wants to restart the plaster boom, right? And in doing so, you want to fill the city with statue-loving people, as before, correct?"

"Yes...that's right." She nodded and slipped in an unnecessary addendum: "And of course, it'd also be nice make a little money while we're at it."

However, the origin of the city's troubles lay in the fact that people had completely stopped paying attention to statues.

"So you all want to return to the prosperity you had before, right?" I asked.

She nodded.

In that case...

If that's what you want...

I said to the official, “Well then, I know an even easier method than restoring this statue to the way it was.”

The day the plaster statue was put on display, all sorts of people came to visit, and they exhausted the limits of abusive language.

“To think that there’s a scoundrel who would tamper with such a historical statue!”

“How utterly awful! This can be considered nothing less than disrespect of history!”

“We ought to arrest the villain who did this to the statue at once!”

You could say their outrage was justified.

I don’t know whether she was excited by the project, or maybe overwhelmed, but in any case, earlier, the Charcoal Witch had gotten carried away with the statue, which the official and I had decided to display without further alteration.

Consequently, the plaster statue corner of the library of historical records was crowded with people, and various newspaper reporters were making much of the situation for their articles, which ended up functioning as advertisements for the exhibit and ironically returning the place to its former bustling state.

“Unbelievable...! To meddle with a historical statue in this way!”

“Who on earth could have done this?! This...this...”

“...Huh? It’s kind of cute, isn’t it?”

“...Actually, I think this design is all right, don’t you?”

Young people gathered to try to get a glimpse of a statue that some traveler had desecrated, while those who had been around for the previous plaster boom crowded into the statue corner, nostalgically lamenting days past.

The official let out a sigh as she looked at the packed library.

“...What an incredible crowd...”

She was really taken aback.

“I never thought it would gather attention like this... As someone who loved the statue before, this is a confusing feeling.”

“Who cares?” I replied. “It doesn’t matter if people were or weren’t interested in the original sculpture. That doesn’t change the fact that they’re here to see it now and that the art is reaching a new audience. However it happened, their enthusiasm is authentic.”

At least the people care enough to get angry about some outsider tampering with a plaster statue.

It was no worse a reason than any other.

“But to think it turned out to be a good thing, what the Charcoal Witch did to that statue...,” the official muttered, staring vacantly at the throng. “If we expand into merchandising, we might be able to make quite a lot of money.”

“Mm-hmm.”

I see. I didn’t even consider the merchandising... Just think, if someone were to start selling merchandise featuring the statue in its new condition, the newspapers would definitely make a big show of condemning them. And what do you know, that would draw even more attention to the statue itself. No doubt about it, you could make quite a lot of money selling that merchandise. Ah, but since the statue was modified by Saya, working out the copyright would be a pain... Wait, but if she ever challenges me, I could use the statute of rights to usage of one’s likeness to shield me.

“Lady Witch, are you having wicked thoughts?”

“.....No.”

I turned away coldly. This was no time for wicked thoughts. I shook off the ulterior motives that had flashed across my mind.

The noisy crowd continued to fill the library, indifferent to our casual scheming.

“In the end, I don’t suppose you have any intention of returning that statue to normal, do you?” the resigned official grumbled as she gazed at the crowd.

I shook my head just once and answered, “I think that might be for the best.”

And then, secretly, I shared some information with the official.

“The statue was always like that, you know.”

It had always been a different person from the neck down.

[The Case of a Particular Pupil]

“I wonder if a goddess would have a face like this?” My teacher hummed thoughtfully as she patted the plaster statue that I had finished sculpting. “No, maybe it’s better to make her a little cuter...”

“People don’t want a statue of a goddess to be cute.”

“Well then, what do they want, I wonder?”

“A reverent, mysterious beauty...maybe?”

“I see...in other words, someone who looks like me. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Incorrect.”

“Fran, model the face of the goddess after me, won’t you?”

“You’re getting in the way of my repairs. Please go somewhere else and leave me to my work.”

My name is Fran.

This may come as a surprise, but I’d like to write an account of a crime that involved myself and my teacher. There are many parts that will be unpleasant to hear about, but I’d very much appreciate it if you could somehow stick with me until the end.

If I remember correctly, the weather was clear that day.

My teacher and I were travelers, and we were entrusted with a package by a certain city.

It was apparently a statue of a goddess that had sat in the city since antiquity, but just as we were leaving to continue our journey, the people said to us, “Our neighboring city has just completed its library of historical records, and we would like to give them this as a gift,” and asked us to take it. You could say we had the bothersome task foisted upon us.

“That other city hasn’t been around long, so it seems they don’t really have important artifacts like this. To mark the creation of their library of historical

records, they put out a request for nearby cities to send them historical documents. And, well, our city is unfortunately not all that interested in such things, so we decided to send them this instead.”

Why on earth would you build a library of historical records if you don't have much history...?

That question occurred to me, but my teacher had said, “Yes, of course. Allow us to be of assistance,” and exchanged a handshake with the government official, so we ended up transporting the thing.

“Oh, Lady Witch? I was told the shipping charges are to be paid in advance, so here...” I could see the two of them having a stealthy back-and-forth, but I was just an apprentice, so I pretended not to see.

Anyhow, that’s how we came to be transporting a mysterious plaster statue.

And then, immediately after we were outside of the city’s gate—

There came the discussion of who should carry the thing, and my teacher made the proposal, “How about we alternate?” So that’s what we did. As we crossed from one country to another, we rode our brooms and literally tossed it back and forth.

We only discovered the shocking truth after we were well underway.

There was a perfect grove of trees between the two cities, so we decided to take a rest there and brought our brooms down to land.

Once we were on the ground, my teacher said quite innocently, “Come to think of it, I never really got a good look at this goddess statue...” She pulled off the cloth that had been covering the package.

“Ah, now that you mention it, I haven’t looked at it, either.” I waited close behind my teacher to witness the unveiling of the goddess.

But...

“.....”

“.....”

We put the cloth back.

“It doesn’t have a head...” My teacher had turned pale.

“It doesn’t have arms, either...” I had turned pale.

Did we see it wrong? We must have seen it wrong. That’s right, there’s no way a statue of a goddess would be so incomplete. That would be utterly ridiculous.

I pulled the cloth off again.

“.....”

“.....”

“It’s a wreck...”

“A total wreck...”

How on earth had the package gotten broken? Let’s think about this, considering the manner in which we had transported the package thus far.

Below are my recollections.

“Heave!” My teacher tossed the package to me with a strong blast of magic.

“Hyah!” I tossed the package back with a strong blast of magic.

“Rrrah!” My teacher tossed the package with...you know the rest.

“Ryah!” I tossed the package...you know the rest.

“Hee-yah!” My teacher...you know the rest.

“Ha-yah!” I...you know the rest.

That’s all.

“I wonder how on earth it got broken... I have no idea...” I gazed off into the distance.

“I know... I can’t even guess how...” My teacher stood beside me, gazing off into the distance.

“.....”

“.....”

There stood two bewildered travelers in front of a plaster statue that had been broken by their carelessness. Both of us were mages, but we were

confronting a problem that could not be solved just by casting spells. So we both simply stood there in silence. Unfortunately, unless we found the damaged parts, the goddess statue would remain missing her head and arms.

There was no way we could deliver it to the library of historical records in its current state.

By the way.

Who on earth could they have been, these two witches at their wits' end in this hopeless situation?

That's right, it was us.

Ultimately, we ended up retracing our path, looking to see if the statue's head and arms were just lying around somewhere. But for some reason, we couldn't find anything that looked like statue parts anywhere, and in the end, we weren't really sure what had happened to them.

"Miss! I bought some statue parts!"

So we decided to make new ones.

This is when the conversation I included at the beginning of this account unfolded. We were anxious about what would happen if someone noticed that the face was different and our secret was exposed, but we figured that if anyone asked, we could just say that we were only paid to transport the thing.

We both let out a sigh as we looked at the finished remodel.

"This is...unmistakably a goddess..."

"Wait, isn't it just your face, Miss?"

"In other words, a goddess, yes."

"Do you have plaster for brains?"

At any rate, we had tried, with our excellent skills, to repair the damaged head and arms.

There were no traces of the former statue left. From the neck up, it was a beautiful woman. Into its damaged hands, we somehow placed a spear that we bought from a blacksmith's bargain bin in a nearby city and staged it to look

right. I had taken the restoration of the goddess statue seriously until about halfway through the process, but then my teacher had decided to make the goddess's face look nearly identical to her own, and I had decided that I didn't care anymore.

"I think we probably won't get any complaints if it looks like this."

"You're right. I think it's perfect."

"How about it? It's lovely, resembling me, right?"

"You're right. I think it's perfect."

My teacher was filled with mysterious confidence, and my eyes were like those of a dead fish. We carried the plaster statue to the city that had recently erected its library of historical records.

However...

The government official who came to greet us stared at the goddess statue and frowned.

"This is...the goddess statue...?" the official asked, wearing a puzzled expression. "I had heard that the goddess statue was missing its head and arms, but...?"

We were stunned. It was like heaven itself had come crashing down on us.

This is something that I heard later in secret, but apparently, the goddess statue had originally lost its arms during a war.

In other words, everything would have been fine if we had just transported the package with innocent looks on our faces.

We had ended up causing even more trouble, and now we were in a major bind.

"Um...actually, they found them right before we came to your city. She got fixed!" My flustered teacher let her mouth run.

You can't possibly think she's going to be fooled by an explanation like—

"Is that really true?! Wow! And my goodness, she's beautiful."

Oh, she was fooled. That was easy.

“She *is* beautiful, isn’t she? Well, she is a goddess, after all.” My teacher was wearing a very satisfied expression.

“Thank you so much. This is sure to bring crowds to our library of historical records.”

“Oh-hoh-hoh, don’t mention it! We only did what was natural as travelers.” It wasn’t clear whether or not my teacher knew that she wasn’t under suspicion, but she kept wearing her satisfied expression.

As I stared vacantly at the two of them—the government official and my teacher—I felt fairly relieved.

After a short while, the official said, “Oh, Madam Witch? I was told that the shipping charges were to be paid on arrival, so here...,” and the two of them started a hushed exchange. But I was just an apprentice, so I pretended not to see. I wasn’t privy to the particulars of the deal, so I kept quiet.

Later, we heard that a rumor that the head and arms of the goddess statue had been repaired spread through the countryside like wildfire. In fact, a new rumor that the goddess had somehow regrown the parts she had lost during the war began to circulate, and for better or worse, the city and its library of historical records found itself at the center of an unprecedented history boom.

Although, most of the visitors who came from foreign countries immediately realized the head and arms were obvious fakes, and so the hype died down.

These days, I hear that the story of the two travelers who got carried away messing with the statue became more famous outside of the city, yet even now, I’m still concealing the fact that I was one of those travelers.

I’d like to carry the tale of this incident to my grave.



CHAPTER 5

Village of Beauties

I visited that village quite a while ago.

I had only just started my travels, and I was flying through the forest on my broom when I happened upon it.

My memories from that time are fuzzy. Honestly, I don't recall just what region or in what sort of place that village was located. The scenery of the environment that surrounded the village was so very ordinary; there was nothing there but the forest.

However, among all my hazy memories, there is one unique thing about that village, a single thing that I do recall quite clearly.

It's the village's name.

It was called...

...the Village of Beauties.



"Welcome to the Village of Beauties!"

Standing beside a cheap-looking gate set in a cheap-looking fence was a beautiful girl. She was probably about one or two years younger than me. This place called itself the Village of Beauties, so I figured the residents must be pretty confident, and sure enough, that girl was the very definition of beauty.

If I had been a naive young man, I probably would have been dumbstruck, unable to even look her in the eye.

"Hi there," I replied with a slight bow.

"Are you a traveler?" The beautiful gate guard smiled and tilted her head. "We welcome female travelers. Please, go on in!"

The guard tugged at my hand, urging me along, and to my surprise, I was pulled straight into the village.

Uh.

But.

“Um...what is the Village of Beauties? What does it mean?”

I looked at the guard as she pulled me by the hand.

“Hmm?” She kept prancing along with excited little steps as she turned to me. “Everyone who has ever visited this village has called it that. So our current elder said we should go ahead and make it our official name, and that’s how we came to be called the Village of Beauties,” she explained.

Well, that’s a display of extremely excessive conceitedness. Aren’t they embarrassed to say that? No, they chose that name because they’re not embarrassed by it, isn’t that right?

Walking behind the excited girl, I looked around at the interior of the village.

It was a small village, with wooden houses standing here and there.

Every one of them, without exception, looked old, dilapidated, and deserted. I supposed this village must have been here since antiquity.

“.....”

Standing among the quiet houses were the villagers, looking at us with curious eyes. There were young women tilling the fields. Women carrying baskets stuffed with vegetables on their backs. Women lounging in the shade of the trees. Women chatting and relaxing by the side of the road.

There couldn’t have been many people there, and as far as I could see, all of them were young women, and every one of them, without exception, was a beauty. These young women of tender years, without exception, all had gorgeous faces.

I see. This certainly does seem to be a village of beauties.

“By the way, Miss Traveler, what is your name?”

“I’m Elaina.”

“I see. Elaina, is it? This is the first time a traveler as beautiful as us has come here! I feel a great connection with you already!”

“Huh...”

The excited guard was still pulling on my hand.

“As a traveler, you must know many things about the outside world, right? Please tell us a story or two, won’t you, please?”

“Huh...”

“Ah, this is the village elder’s house.”

And then the guard stopped on the spot. It was a little late for this, but I wondered whether she was really cut out to be a guard. She had left the gate wide open. Though I couldn’t imagine very many people came this deep into the forest anyway.

The house that she had pointed out as being the village elder’s house looked just as old as all the other ones. Even though she was supposed to be in charge around here, she didn’t really seem to be living in the lap of luxury.

“Goodness, a traveler?”

With perfect timing, a single woman emerged from the village elder’s house.

“This person is our village elder. What do you think? She’s quite a beauty, isn’t she?” For some reason, the guard spoke boastfully. This woman was no exception; she was a beautiful young woman. She may have been the village elder, but that apparently didn’t mean she was actually any older than the rest of them. Not in this village.

“Hello. It’s rare to see a beautiful traveler, oh-hoh-hoh!” As she let out a sophisticated laugh, the village elder extended a hand toward me.

This was turning out to be a very strange place. I stared at the village elder as I took her hand.

“...Are there only women in this village?” I asked, though I could pretty much guess the answer from the fact that it was named Village of Beauties.

So far, everyone I’d seen, without exception, had been a woman. It certainly struck me as odd to have such a skewed ratio of the sexes.

“It is as you say.” However, the village elder nodded, as if it was only natural.

“As you can see, this is the Village of Beauties. Only young, beautiful women are permitted to live here.”

Sure enough, it seemed there were only young beauties, or girls who looked like they would grow up to be beautiful.

“Well then, how does the village maintain itself?”

It was a straightforward question. Without the help of men, it seemed like the village would have a hard time sustaining itself. After all, they wouldn’t be able to have children. The population would just keep shrinking.

It wasn’t hard to imagine that the Village of Beauties would eventually turn into the Village of Biddies, and then finally the Village of Bones.

“Oh! What’s this, a new girl?”

Just then, a voice came from inside the village elder’s house, and a lively looking young man appeared from behind the door. “Hoh-hoh, what have we here...?” He turned his gaze on me, as if he was evaluating me.

Who is this man, this picture of boorishness?

“And who might this be?” I asked.

Some kind of live-in livestock, maybe?

Smiling radiantly as she looked at the man, the village elder said, “He is the village’s only man.”

She introduced him plainly.

The only man.

I see, so this is a harem situation?

Doesn’t this mean...?

“So men *do* live here after all?”

I wanted to know just what she meant by telling me that only young, beautiful women were allowed to live here.

I asked my question, and after an awkward pause, the village elder replied, “Hmm? ...Ah, he’s not exactly living here, you know.”

She smiled slightly and stared at the man again. The look in her eyes was somehow captivating, and fiery. She looked just like a wolf stalking its prey.

...A woman on the hunt, huh?



“Well, the truth is, I actually used to be a traveler, too, and roamed through all sorts of lands, but this place—well, I guess you could call it heaven. Really, they ought to name it the Village of Men’s Dreams.”

“Huh...”

I had been invited into the village elder’s house and was hearing all sorts of tales from the man.

Apparently, this man had previously wandered the world as a traveler, but one day, he had received an invitation from a girl native to this village. “Come visit our village! Only women live there!” She added to this sweet temptation, “If you come, you can enjoy the company of as many of the village women as you like.”

He told me that at first, he, too, had thought it had to be a joke and that he had suspected the girl was running some sort of clever scam. These things do happen, after all. And thinking about it rationally, there was no way such a perfect village could exist, right?

But it did exist. What a surprise.

“Apparently, the girls around here never leave the village until they’re all grown up. And as a result, they never get to meet any men. So I was the one chosen to deliver these poor women from the torment of loneliness.”

The man snorted. “My life here is great. Every day, I come and go between many houses, and every day, I get to enjoy myself with many women—though I’d never do anything with the young ones, obviously. Although, if there’s one downside to all this, it’s that my diet and exercise are strictly controlled. But I do get plenty of exercise at night, so that’s not really an issue.”

“Um, excuse me, but are there any hotels or inns in this village?”

“Hey, I was in the middle of a story—”

“Sorry, I stopped listening.”

“Oh. How mean.”

“So about that place to stay.”

If there wasn't one, I would promptly be on my way.

But...

“Well, there aren't any inns, but I'm sure we can find you a place to stay. You're in luck!”

The generous person who clapped a hand down on my shoulder and made that suggestion was none other than the village elder.

She turned her beaming grin on me and said, “Tomorrow, our village will be holding a harvest festival, so tonight, all the adults will gather at my house to prepare. Everyone will probably end up sleeping here anyway, so all the houses in the village should be virtually empty.”

“...A harvest festival?”

“Yes. We hold them regularly. Tomorrow will mark half a year since he came to us.”

“Ah...has that much time passed already? ...What a lonely thought...” The man didn't try to hide his grimace.

What on earth does he mean by that?

I tilted my head inquisitively, and the village elder kindly answered me.

“Our village has certain rules regarding how long men are allowed to stay. After a man has lived with us for half a year, he must take his leave. That is our custom.”

The man shrugged. “I wish I could stay a bit longer... Ah, what a bothersome custom.”

The village elder smiled wryly at him. “Good grief,” she muttered before turning back to me. “Well, in any case, it's tradition in our village to hold a farewell ceremony during the harvest festival.”

“What do you do at the harvest festival?”

“We all eat together.”

She counted on her fingers.

“We eat tasty salads, and bread, and cookies, and cake, and mutton.”

“So it’s just a normal dinner party?”

Though the menu is pretty weird. Sweets and salad and sheep’s meat? What an odd combination.

“Will you join us?”

“...I’ll consider it.”

That’s how I answered her, but I had already decided to leave the following morning.

For some reason, this village made me feel uncomfortable.



“What’s that? You don’t have a place to stay? My goodness! Well, I guess it can’t be helped. You can stay at my place!”

When I left the village elder’s house, the gate guard came to greet me with an easygoing “Yoo-hoo!”

Apparently, she had been sitting outside waiting the whole time, and now she was waving and brushing off her backside.

“Is there some reason why you didn’t come inside the village elder’s house?”

“Mm, well, I’m working now. People would get mad if I took tea at the elder’s house.”

“...You seem to be acting quite freely, considering you’re on the clock.”

“Oh, come on, Elaina! It’s not like that many people are going to come to a village this deep in the woods.”

“I think maybe you ought to ruminate on your own words for a bit.”

“Well, that aside, what do you say? Will you come stay at my house?”

“.....” At this point, I didn’t feel like going to the trouble of asking someone I had never met before, so I was actually pretty grateful for her invitation, but...

“Sure thing, if your parents say it’s all right.”

“Oh, that’s fine, then. My mom is long gone.”

“.....”

I don’t think that’s something people are supposed to say with a smile.

“Well then, how about your dad?”

“Never met him.”

“That doesn’t sound good at all...”

If the village replaced its single male resident every six months, then it was no surprise that she had never seen her father’s face.

But isn’t that sort of sad?

“Well, it would be hard for me to miss a father I never knew, don’t you think?”

It seems my fears were unfounded.

“And my mother left the village when I was very small, but everyone here is like one big family, so I wasn’t really lonely or anything.”

She began walking slowly and aimlessly, telling me everything in a detached tone of voice. She didn’t seem bothered to be sharing any of this personal information.

“Everyone in this village is the same. Our traditions stand at the center of our lives. We know nothing of the outside world, but that’s surely a good thing!” She laughed.

There was no way I could understand the mind of a girl who thought like that.

After that, the two of us strolled around the village.

I had a whole lot of nothing to do and plenty of time to not do it, so I wanted to kill a few hours.

“I’m sorry to say, our village doesn’t really have any interesting places to show off...”

With an apologetic smile, the young guard led the way, and sure enough,

there wasn't really anything worth mentioning.

"Anyway, here's the nursery." She pointed to an ordinary house. "Girls stay here for several years after we're born, and we learn the traditions and customs of the village."

"Uh-huh."

I nodded vacantly.

"And here is the poultry farm." The next place we visited was a short, long house. "This is where we raise chickens and get their eggs."

"I see."

Only their eggs? So in other words...

"You don't use their meat?"

"Meat?" When she responded, the guard was wearing a very puzzled expression. "Do people eat the meat of chickens elsewhere in the world...?"

"Um...yes. It's eaten pretty regularly..."

"Oh, how savage!" The girl looked appalled. "Even though they're sooo cute?!" She whined and wriggled around.

Okay, well, I can understand how a person from a different culture might see chickens differently, but...cute? Really?

If I had to choose one, I think I'd say that sheep are cuter, but still...

The tour continued.

"This is the armory."

"Why do you have an armory in your village?"

"Well, we need weapons for wrangling and butchering the sheep, don't we?"

I see, so in other words, it's full of kitchen tools.

"And here is the farmer's house!"

"I see. I can tell from the looks of it that it's an ordinary farmhouse." Behind the house were the fields.

“My final task for today is to pick up some wheat from here.”

She looked awfully proud of herself for some reason, but it would have been more trouble than it was worth to knock the wind out of her sails, so I left it alone.

“And here is my house!”

“Ah, so we were just walking you home, is that it?”

“Well, it’s evening already!”

In the end, we had spent the whole day just looking around the village.

While we had been taking our time with the tour, the other women had been quietly starting preparations for the harvest festival. Looking out across the village, I could see that there were many women heading for the village elder’s house.

For example, there were women carrying bags of wheat, and others holding freshly picked vegetables and fruits, and still others holding large kitchen knives. They were carrying all sorts of things, and each of them looked quite excited to be getting ready for the harvest festival.

All of them looked cheerful, just like girls going to meet their sweethearts.

“Come on, Elaina! Leave the adults to their business. We’ll have a party, just the two of us! What do you say?”

Just like when she had ushered me into the village, the young guard was tugging on my sleeve, and she tugged me right into her house.

And that is how I came to stay at her house.

“Ah...must be nice. I bet they’re all preparing for the harvest festival right now.”

As she grumbled about it, the guard brought out dinner: a simple loaf of bread. That was it. A dinner of bread. How frugal...

Chewing on my bread, I gazed out the window. In the distance, I could see lights on at the village head’s house.

“What do they do to prepare?” I asked, chomping away.

“Mmm, they get everything ready for cooking.”

“What is there to do?”

“Well, it takes a lot of work to make a tasty meal, right?”

Yeah, I already know that...

But I can't imagine that baking cookies and bread and a cake requires a village full of women to gather the day before to “get everything ready.”

“The preparations for the main dish are especially taxing. That’s what the village head says.” The gate guard continued, “She says that getting the mutton ready takes time. It’s an adult sheep, and they can be violent. If it were a lamb, it could be easily wrangled.”

At this point, I was starting to feel a bit uneasy.

I was sure I had been strolling around the village with the young guard all afternoon, and yet...

Does this village even raise sheep?

Never mind full-grown sheep—I hadn’t seen even a single lamb.

I’m sure I must have just missed them...

“Tell me more. What kinds of things need to be done, exactly?” I asked, tossing out the first question that came to mind.

“Huh? Well, first they wrangle them—”

“Annnd I’m bored already.”

The key must be what comes after that. The part where they get the meat? Surely that’s a lot of hard work? I mean, if it takes a whole village working together through the night, it must be pretty intense.

“The village elder is very enthusiastic about this harvest festival, you know.” The young guard seemed to enjoy talking, and she continued on as she chewed her bread. “Because when the festival is over, she has to leave the village.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“Mmm...” The young guard looked like she was thinking for a moment, then

said, “Because that’s the custom. Once the village elder puts on a harvest festival, she leaves the village right afterward. She leaves, and then after a little while, a new person takes her place.”

I see. So that’s the reason why the village elder is so young?

I was starting to put the pieces together, but there were still a lot that didn’t fit.

“I don’t understand the purpose behind changing village elders so frequently...,” I said, tilting my head inquisitively.

“Well, if we don’t do that, we can’t get a new sheep.”

“.....?”

Can’t get a sheep...?

I had a feeling that we had been talking past each other regarding a fundamental part of this conversation.

“The job of the village elder is to throw a fine harvest festival and to find a new sheep. So tomorrow, our current village elder, like all those before her, will leave the village for a while after the festival is over, in order to find a new sheep for us to raise.”

For some reason, those words chilled me to the bone.

It was at this point that I was finally able to put my finger on what was wrong with this cheerful-seeming village.

“Once she finds a delicious-looking sheep outside the village, *she brings it back here, and the new village elder takes charge of rearing it.* And if any little lambs are born in the village, we cook them. And we regularly hold harvest festivals where we eat the mutton.”

It finally dawned on me.

Waaay too late, it finally, finally dawned on me.

Mutton.

A village with only women. Just one man. Sheep. Rearing. Meat. Dietary restrictions. Exercise restrictions. Harvest festivals.

.....

I was at a loss for words, dumbfounded by the repulsive reality of it all. The young guard's eyes glittered as she spoke. "So you see, I think they'll be serving some very delicious mutton at tomorrow's harvest festival. I mean, the village elder has spent quite a lot of time raising the sheep."

In the end, I didn't wait for morning. I left the village right away. That very night.

I fled, if I'm being honest.

Far away from the terrifying truth.



It's a memory I don't like to recall. If possible, I would bury it for eternity. That's why I haven't mentioned it before.

I'm sure that to the women of that village, their home is everything to them, and they know nothing of the world beyond.

Yet even if I searched far and wide, I don't think I could find such a depraved custom anywhere else. And I hope, from the bottom of my heart, that I'm right.

"....."

I was in a place far removed from that village, walking around town by myself, when the memory came back to me.

"Ah, miss! Wanna try some barbecue?"

As I was walking, someone called out to me from a street stall. Behind a forest of blackened meat skewers stood a single old woman, staring right at me, wearing a particularly sanguine grin.

"How 'bout it? Hmm?"

The old woman held a skewer out to me.

Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing any old women in that village, either.

"What kind of meat is it...?" I asked.

The woman grinned suggestively.

“It’s mutton.”





CHAPTER 6

A Tale of Monsters and Misguided Humans

One day, roughly four hundred years ago, the history of this corner of the world changed in a major way.

As if out of nowhere, a humongous dragon appeared and began attacking people.

With its enormous body, covered in bluish-white scales that glinted like ice in the moonlight, it trampled houses and fields underfoot. With its sharp, pointed fangs and claws, it decimated livestock. Worst of all, a single beat of its massive wings was enough to send bodies spiraling through the air like rag dolls.

No one knew what it wanted. It seemed to be attacking in a fit of violent rage.

The dragon rampaged from country to country, leaving devastation in its wake at every turn, until finally disappearing into the sky as if satisfied with itself before inevitably landing in another country and repeating the bloody process.

Countless countries were driven to ruin by the dragon's sudden appearance. Entire nations, and their histories, were wiped out of existence.

Everyone living during that era believed that, eventually, the dragon was going to destroy everything.

And so, the remaining nations all agreed to stop quarreling with one other, setting aside all their conflicts and grudges, and banded together. They stopped isolating themselves and began sharing information. Even so, the dragon continued its rampage.

One country built weapons with which to fight the dragon and then gathered soldiers. One country doused their crops with poison meant to fell the dragon. One country fortified their houses, gates, and ramparts in the hopes that they would withstand the dragon's might.

But not one of them stood a ghost of a chance, and sure enough, nations continued to fall. Time and time again, they stood against the dragon, and time

and time again, the dragon emerged victorious.

Eventually, the people realized that they had no hope of bringing the dragon down, even when working together. They understood that they were confronting a force that was far beyond them.

They decided they had no choice but to ask for help.

The people living in that region had one individual in mind, probably the only person who could stand up to the dragon.

She was a witch who lived all alone, deep in the small, remote forest that bordered the countries.

This witch possessed incredible power, but it was because she was so powerful that she didn't like to meddle in the affairs of the people and had chosen a life of isolation. However, the people realized that they had no way of defeating the dragon without her assistance, so they went to beg her for help.

Officials from every nation approached her in great numbers, smiling amiably, with not an unpleasant face among them.

"I understand the situation," the witch said, rising to her feet. *"I shall do something."*

Soon, she found herself standing before the rampaging dragon.

"Mighty dragon! For what purpose do you trample these human lives?"

"AAAAAAAAAAHHH!"

"Ah, you're the type of dragon that can't understand human language. Okay..."

If conversation were a viable option, they wouldn't have gone to the trouble of dragging a witch out from the wilderness, I suppose, the witch thought calmly to herself.

After that, the witch blasted the dragon with all sorts of offensive spells.

Even a dragon was at a loss for what to do when confronted with the overwhelming power of a witch. Just as the dragon could easily destroy people and their countries, the witch could easily defeat the dragon.

“By the way, regarding the reward... Once I’ve dealt with this matter,” the witch had said to the delegation that came to recruit her, *“I expect to be paid an extraordinary sum, enough to live the rest of my life in comfort.”*

“Oh, um...that’s...quite a large sum indeed.” The officials had balked.

“Hmm? Surely it’s a small price to pay when the salvation of your homes is at stake!” The witch had gotten angry.

She had a bit of a dark side when it came to money.

In the end, the witch bested the dragon. Over and over again. But no matter how many times she defeated it, it never died. Though she was very powerful, she wasn’t able to kill it. That was simply a testament to its indomitable life force.

“If it refuses to die no matter what...then I suppose I have no choice.”

Tired from fighting for such a long time, the witch cast a certain spell on the dragon.

A sealing spell.

She imprisoned the dragon inside a boulder.

In doing so, the witch had finally dealt with the dragon that had been terrorizing the region.

“Four hundred years.”

Rubbing the boulder where the dragon slept, the witch said, *“My seal will not last forever. After four hundred years, it will likely come undone. When that day comes, we must once again join hands and confront the dragon. And so, for the next four hundred years, you must do whatever you can to prepare yourselves!”*

With this, she moved the boulder that held the dragon deep into the forest.

It’s said that when the witch had completed her task, she vanished into thin air, right before the people’s eyes.

Apparently even now, the boulder with the dragon sealed inside sits quietly beside the house where the witch once lived.

That seemed to be the legend of the dragon in this region, as I had heard the

same story in every country I had visited over the past few days.

It had been embellished in different ways depending on the country, but that was roughly how the story went. In short, the questionable rumors concerning a dragon imprisoned in a big boulder deep in the forest had all originated with this fable.

Of course, that wasn't all. Perhaps because of the popularity of the legend, whenever someone scolded a child in this region, they would often include an oversized threat like *"If you don't behave, the dragon will return!"* Of course, the children usually responded to the threat with oversized confidence: *"I don't care. If the dragon comes back, then I'll defeat it!"*

At any rate, that's how the legend of the dragon had so deeply ingrained itself into the people's lives.

But the actual boulder where the dragon had been sealed had, contrary to the rumors, been lost to time and forgotten.

I figured that no one was interested in the real truth behind the legend. A boulder just sitting there, covered in moss, deep in the forest, for the last four hundred years. By now, no trace of the old witch's house remained. It had probably been demolished long ago.

Whether or not there really was a dragon was inconsequential. The boulder could just be an ordinary boulder around which a legend had sprung up. That's how it appeared to the people who lived around there.

Even if today was the appointed day...the day the dragon was to return.

"....."

Things like legends and fables tend to wither away over time, because only the people who were alive at the time know the truth of the tale.

So to be honest, I didn't put much stock in the legend myself, until I saw it with my own eyes.

Until I met *her*.

"Mwa-ha-ha-ha! It's been a while, humans! Today, I am released from my cramped prison!"

Just then, the boulder cracked open like an egg, and, smashing it apart from the inside, a single girl appeared.

“The dragon Luciella is reboooooorn!”

The girl was obviously referring to herself. She looked to be about eighteen years old, but she called herself “the dragon.”

Her hair was light green, and her eyes were crimson. Otherwise, she seemed like an ordinary girl. But apparently, she was a dragon. Oh, and one detail I neglected to mention was that she was stark naked at the moment.

“...Kyah!”

Thinking to myself that I would like her to put on some clothes right away, I covered my eyes and let out a shriek.



At the risk of repetition, allow me to once again explain the situation in which I found myself.

After four hundred years, the seal on the boulder had broken, and deep in the forest, the dragon had been resurrected. But she was a girl.

This development was altogether unexpected, so I was greatly perplexed. Let's take another look at the girl before my eyes.

She had no wings and no tail. From the outside, she really did look like an ordinary human. Really, the only things that gave her away were the two small horns growing from her head. Oh, and I suppose her teeth might have been a bit sharper than most people's.

“Huh? Who the heck're you? I knew I felt a weird pair of eyes starin' at me. You tryna pick a fight? You wanna go? Huh?”

Also, her personality might have been a little extra sharp, too. Anyway, she really had the form of an ordinary human girl. And, maybe because she had been sleeping for such a long time, she didn't seem very clever. Miss Dragon didn't seem to have noticed that her form had changed. Or that she was naked.

She brought her face close to me, the only human standing before her, and glared at me, her eyes glinting gold in the shifting light, then blew a puff of air in

my face. “Oh? Ya scared? You thought I was gonna blow fire at you just now, right?” She was playing with me.

With an “aaah,” she opened her mouth wide, then laughed triumphantly. “Mwa-ha-ha! Betcha thought you were about to get eaten by me, huh? Mwa-ha-ha! Just kidding! A young girl like you doesn’t have much meat on ’er, and you don’t even look tasty.” She was clearly trying to provoke me, though I couldn’t imagine why. “Yer a quiet one. What’s your deal? This your first time seeing a dragon? Or are you just enchanted by how cool I look? Hmm?” This whole thing was starting to give me a headache, so right then, I turned my hand mirror around to face her. “I suppose true admiration knows no bounds, especially when I’m so coo—AAAAAAAAAAHHH!”

“You’re so loud.” I winced.

“Th-th-this...is? It’s me? This is *me*?” Luciella, the dragon, was trembling. “Seriously? *This* is what I look like? Huh? What happened to my wings? My tail? My scales?”

I silently shook my head.

Quoting a passage from one of legends told in this region, I said, “According to the witch who sealed you away, a curse was incorporated into the seal so that when the dragon one day awakened, she would be reborn in human form and would not bring any more destruction.”

“What’d you saaay?!” Miss Dragon was angry. “Grrr...you! Take me to her at once! Right away! Where is she?! This way?!”

And then she left me behind and stalked off down the forest road. She had only just awoken, but Miss Dragon had such a...lively personality, you’d never think she had been asleep. It didn’t really bother me, but I wondered what sort of person would tell someone to take her somewhere and then set off on her own.

Or maybe she hadn’t realized that four hundred years had passed.

“Um—”

I extended a hand toward her.

“What the heck are you doing?! What direction do I go...?” Suddenly, like a broken doll, Luciella the dragon stopped in her tracks and dropped to the ground, unable to move. “.....So hungry...,” she murmured weakly.

Several hundred years’ worth of hunger must have caught up with her all at once.

“.....” After a moment’s hesitation, I said, “First things first, would you like to eat something?”

“.....” She slowly sat up. “Take me to a delicious restaurant right away!” She was crying.

“Before we go, would you put on some clothes?”

“...Okay.” Luciella wiped her tears away with a snuffle.

This was all happening awfully fast, but if I understood the situation, this girl was, apparently, the dragon that had once terrorized this region—or at least that’s what she claimed. But now she was trapped in the form of a young lady, lying stark naked on the ground, and there was no way I could just leave her there. So I decided to first dress her in some clothes, then head for a nearby city.

“Where do you want to go? I’ve been to all the countries in this area once already, so I know my way around.”

“Are you for real?”

I was still working to come to terms with this all-too-sudden development as I cheerfully motioned for her to get on the broom, and she enthusiastically took a seat behind me.

And that was how the curtain rose on our journey that was to last several days.



Luciella claimed to be the dragon that had been sealed away.

“So you really are a dragon, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Sounds pretty far-fetched, but...”

“I mean, it’s no wonder you can’t believe it. I never thought I would be in a puny little body like this when I woke up. I guess I can’t say anything except that you gotta believe me.”

Be that as it may, she did emerge from a boulder, so she definitely had to be the dragon. For the time being, I decided the only thing to do was play along.

But if she *was* the dragon...

“.....”

If she was, and I sucked up to her, then I might get to hear the legends told throughout this region from the dragon’s own point of view.

Basically, I would be able to set the record straight and shed new light on an old legend.

...I could already smell the money.

“What’s going on with you? You’re makin’ an evil face.”

“This is my regular face.”

“Oh...gross...”

“Rude.”

On the day the dragon broke free, I steered us in the direction of the closest civilization. I had asked if there was anything she wanted to eat, and the girl dressed in my clothes had responded, “Something tasty!” So without putting much thought into it, we walked over to a nice-looking restaurant.

And when we got there...

“You! I said I wanted to eat something delicious, didn’t I?! What do you mean by choosing a restaurant so casually?! Do you take me for a fool?!”

When we got to our seats and I placed my order, the self-proclaimed dragon started banging on the table and shouting loudly. I couldn’t do anything but shrug in exasperation at her actions.

“Most of the food in this country is tasty, you know.”

“Huh? What the heck are you talking about? And what’s with that smug look on your face?”

“.....”

“.....”

Before long, the food arrived.

Without much thought, I lined up the dishes that I had requested on the table, then offered explanations for each one, as if I was a frequent customer. Wearing a very self-satisfied look, of course.

“This is this country’s specialty pizza. It’s made with a spicy sauce.”

“I see. Is that why the whole thing’s red?”

“That’s this country’s specialty bread. It’s made with a spicy sauce.”

“I see. It’s bright red.”

“And this is this country’s specialty soup. It’s made with a spicy sauce.”

“Does this country only offer spicy food?”

“If you ask for dishes representative of this country, this is what you get.” I didn’t fail to look self-satisfied while presenting my snippets of knowledge about the cuisine. “By the way, if you are the dragon of legend, do you remember that long, long ago, there was a country that laced the food they offered to you with poison?”

“Hmm? I sort of remember that...vaguely.”

“This is that country.”

“What?”

“The red sauce present in all this food was refined from the poison originally concocted to kill you.”

As it turned out, the legend of the dragon had taken on a unique twist in this area. *“The dragon was a true gourmet,”* the legend went, *“so she sought out foods in various countries. Among them, only the food from our country had a flavor that made the dragon blow flame from her mouth.”* The local pandering was pretty obvious.

“So what’s going on here? The fools of this country all willingly ate poison? Are they stupid?”

“Well, they were probably desperate for food at that time.” Then I stared hard at the girl sitting across the table from me and tilted my head quizzically. “If you’re really the dragon, surely you can eat food this spicy, right?”

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha! How ridiculous!” Apparently, this had provoked her. “If it’s a poison that I ate once before, then my taste buds have long since overcome it!” And then she enthusiastically set to work on the food.

She ate it.

...And then she cried.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!” Large tears flowed from Luciella’s eyes. “A-are... are you a demon...?! There’s no way I can eat food like this...!”

That’s not something I expected to hear from a dragon that used to torment people...

If I had to guess, it seemed as if somehow, when she gained a human form, she had lost most of her draconic qualities. Now only a shadow of her former powers remained.

“.....”

I wasn’t particularly hungry, so sitting across from Luciella as she heartily ate her meal with tears streaming down her crimson cheeks, I ate some totally normal bread and cheese. Personally, I did not particularly care for the spicy food so unique to this country.

As for Luciella, she kept chomping and chewing away, wiping sweat from her brow. And she didn’t stop at spicy dishes but put in several more orders for all sorts of things, leaving only a pile of empty plates and food scraps.

Finally, after she had finished eating, she was fanning herself with her hand when she said, “Man, these clothes are tight. Especially in the chest—” *Wham!* A fist slammed down onto the table. “Eep! ...What’s with you? You’re scary...”

Whose fist could it have been?

That’s right, it was mine.

“Ha-ha...it’s nothing, nothing at all.”

Well, since we had eaten, the next item of business was to buy her some clothes.

At this point, I was starting to feel like I was on some kind of weird blind date or something. I tried to put that idea out of my mind as I went to pay our restaurant tab.

“.....”

Awaiting me was a price so steep it caused all the blood to immediately drain from my face, which was slightly flushed from the moderate amount of spicy food I had eaten.

“Hmm...how 'bout this? I look cute, right?”

We went to a boutique.

The dressing room curtain *swished* open, and appearing from behind it was an unmistakably beautiful girl. She had changed into a fairly simple getup of an off-shoulder shirt and a skirt, with a black beret to hide her horns. The remains of my clothing had been discarded nearby. Her chest no longer looked confined, as she puffed it out proudly. I wanted to knock her out right there.

“My! That suits you quite well!” The clerk was generous with her compliments.

“Eee-hee-hee!” Luciella seemed particularly susceptible to flattery and grinned shamelessly. “Yoo-hoo, I’ll take this one!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I paid for it. There was no hiding the fact that her ample body had stretched my clothes beyond their limits, so it was an unavoidable expense.

After that, we went around to several more boutiques and secured a few changes of clothes and some underwear for her.

“All right, why don’t we find somewhere to stay?”

I walked off with Luciella in tow. As the veteran traveler, I didn’t forget my self-satisfied look this time, either. “This country is known as the Land of Hospitality because its cuisine, fashion, and lodgings are all cutting-edge. Anyone would agree, it’s perfect for travelers.”

“Uh-huh...”

Shopping bags in each hand, Luciella took a long, sweeping look around town.
“...I feel like I’ve been here before, too, but I have no memory of it.”

“...I’m not really surprised. You were trapped in that rock for a pretty long time.”



Not to mention, four hundred years ago, you completely leveled this place, so...

It was obviously a very different country than it had been back then. In fact, nearly every trace of the era during which Luciella lived as a dragon had vanished from this place.

“...Just how long was I asleep?” she mumbled, gazing out at a city that she could not remember, looking a little sad.

I could tell that her mistrust of the now-unfamiliar city was slowly giving way to a smoldering anxiety over being left behind by time.

“...I imagine that the reason you don’t have any memories of this place is probably because quite a lot of time passed while you were sleeping.”

I averted my eyes from her and looked up at the town. “However, I think that’s simply because the scenery is very different.”

Long ago, she had looked down on all of these cities as a dragon, right? But she had never actually visited any of them. And that had really limited her perspective. The realization that she was actually *in* one of the cities she’d seen from afar must have been sinking in.

However...

“In your current form, you are much better suited to actually experience city life.”

It didn’t hurt that she could actually walk around town for a change.

That day, when we arrived at our lodgings, Luciella said, “I want to try taking one of those shower thingies!” And as soon as we were in the room, she stripped off her clothes and leaped into the shower room. Right afterward, terrible shouts could be heard from inside. “Aaaaaahhh! This feels so goooooood!” As I waited for her to emerge, worrying about getting complaints from our neighbors the whole time, I read more of the legends that were passed down in this region.

“.....”

Depending on the country, and depending on the author, and because all

sorts of embellishments had been made—maybe to suit various influential people—the way the story progressed in each local legend was slightly different from all the others.

For example, in one version, the dragon died in the end, while in another version, the dragon and the witch killed each other. The basic plot of the dragon appearing and harassing the humans and the witch defeating it seemed to stay constant, but through the changes over the years and changes made by individuals, a variety of stories had been born.

As a result, the truth had gotten muddled.

“Hey, you. I finished my shower.” Luciella came out of the shower room just as I was almost finished reading my book of legends.

Her long hair was heavy with water, and she had emerged soaking wet.

“.....” She must have been unfamiliar with how to live like a human, since her essential nature was still that of a dragon.

“You have to dry your hair with a towel after you shower, you know,” I said, wrapping a towel around her hair.

Now, when did I become her servant...?

Indifferent to my unspoken question, Luciella narrowed her eyes as if she liked the way the towel felt, then said, “Mm, what is that fluffy cloth called?”

She was looking at the bed I had just been sitting on.

“This is a futon.”

“Off-tone?”

“No. A futon.”

“Often?”

“.....”

I finished drying her hair.

“All right!” As soon as I was done, she took a running dive onto the bed. She wrapped herself up in the futon and cocooned herself like a caterpillar.

“Ahhhhhhh...it feels so good...” Luciella’s expression slackened into a loose smile. We were staying in a cheap hotel, but the futons in the Land of Hospitality were enchanted with a comforting spell that made them hard to resist.

Luciella had curled into a ball atop the bed, and she let out a huge, sleepy yawn, but my books, which had been piled on top of the futon, slipped off with a rustle of pages and jolted her back to reality.

“Wh-wh-wh-what’s that?! An enemy attack?!”

Luciella escaped from the spell of the futon with extremely nimble movements.

“Oh, sorry... Those are my books,” I said, and I picked the fallen volumes up off the floor.

“...Huh.” Her hand stretched out in the same direction as mine. “That’s me, isn’t it?”

She had picked up one of the books of local fables I had purchased. The cover was decorated with an enormous dragon stomping on a building.

“.....”

As I watched, she traced over the book cover with her fingertip, lingering on the terrifying image of the dragon.

“How nostalgic.”

She flipped through the book as if she was yearning for a bygone era, as if she was rereading a diary from her younger days, and muttered a few words: “In the past, I could never find a place to rest. Even if I did decide to try to settle down somewhere, I didn’t belong anywhere, and no matter where I went, I was a nuisance. Even in this book, I seem like a nuisance—” Without finishing it, she slammed the book shut partway through and handed it back to me.

“...Thanks.” I took the book from her hand and set it down on the bedside table.

“Say, girl. Exactly how long was I asleep?”

“.....”

“You avoided the question this afternoon, but I won’t be shocked, no matter how much time has passed. You don’t need to hold back. Answer me.”

Well, if you put it that way—

“...Four hundred years.”

“...I see. So I was asleep for a really long time,” she muttered to herself. “That means there’s no one left alive who remembers the time I came to their city.”

Even so—

Even if that was the case, she must have been experiencing some complicated emotions in this current age when she hadn’t been forgotten but was constantly depicted as a terrible villain.

Her expression looked lonely.

“And is your past self somewhere in those documents?” I tilted my head.

“Are you studying me, too?” She tilted her head at the same time, in the same way as I had. “You treated me to lunch and took me around to all sorts of places, and I’m grateful for that, but...just what is your aim here?”

She was probably just having some doubts. Luciella narrowed her eyes at me suspiciously.

“.....” I hesitated and then said, “The legends they tell around here are all taken as the honest truth, but depending on where you go, they can be very different. And with so many different versions of the story being told four hundred years after the fact, who can say what actually happened back then? I want to hear the original version of the story.”

And of course, if circumstances permitted, I figured I would be able to make good money off the truth. But I didn’t have to say that part out loud.

“To put it simply, I’m interested in you.”

There was nothing else to say.

At my words, Luciella’s expression softened just a bit.

“...You have the most honest character of any human I’ve ever met,” she said.

“Is that so? You haven’t met very many humans, have you?”

She snorted. “I know enough from the stories.”



Long ago.

Long, long ago.

When she was born, the people of her hometown laid eyes on her and found her to be ghastly.

“What is this child...?”

“She’s too weird...”

“...An abomination.”

In a town where everyone else looked more or less the same, she had been born with a different skin color, which instantly marked her as an outsider.

Everyone ostracized her.

Probably because they thought she was unlucky.

The girl’s unusual appearance was the result of the circumstances of her birth. Her mother had had an affair with someone from another tribe. But even though that was the extent of her *wrongdoing*, it was more than enough reason for her to be shunned by her people.

In her homeland, it was forbidden to fraternize with members of another tribe. To keep their race from dying out, they only permitted procreation between members of the same tribe.

Her mother was driven from her home for breaking the law.

She was never seen again.

But she left the girl behind.

Her mother ran away. She ran away from her responsibility to her newborn daughter, just as she ran away from her home.

The people would not just let a newborn baby die, so the child was passed from one family member to the next, raised by a series of begrudging relatives.

No one loved the girl.

Her appearance made her an easy target for abuse.

Nothing changed, even as she grew up.

“She’s a beast. No question.” The people called her a beast.

“Well...you have to wonder why she hasn’t left already.” There wasn’t a single person among them who had tried to befriend her.

“Don’t look at me, you monster!” She was threatened with violence.

“Ah, you’re so ugly! Such treatment suits a monster like you!” Sometimes, people tormented her just for fun.

If she ventured outside, they would gang up on her, punching and kicking, until she slunk back home, covered in injuries.

Not a single person in her hometown took her side.

Her life there was miserable.

“...Why?”

Why was she the only one who had to endure such treatment? Why did she have to put up with such pain? Every day, she suffered their abuse, and every day, she cried, alone.

Concealing her shame, she went to her relatives for help.

However...

“Sorry...if I’m seen with you, I’ll become an outcast as well.”

...they didn’t save her.

“You understand, right? You’re a nuisance. Don’t come to me again.”

They didn’t offer a helping hand.

“I don’t ever want to see your face again. If you understand me, hurry up and get out of here.”

All of them rejected her.

She lived every day alone, with no help from anyone, passing many years that way.

Then, when she could no longer endure her harsh reality, she set out from her homeland.

Searching for a place to belong.



“In the land of the red dragons, I was the only one with bluish-white scales, so I felt uneasy there.”

As we flew away from the Land of Hospitality on my broom, she sat behind me, telling me indifferently of the events of her past, as if she were recounting a fairy tale. “To the people of my homeland, I was nothing but an outsider. That’s why I left my hometown behind and set out on a journey. A very long time ago... That’s a story from before I even came to this area.”

One day, a dragon appeared.

That was how the legends began, but of course, the dragon herself had lived parts of her life that didn’t get recorded in the fables, and I had expected that there would be some reason for why she came here. It may be a little twisted, but I always wonder about the histories and motivations of the villains that appear in fairy tales.

Villains aren’t simply “bad people.” They’re bad from a certain perspective.

“Hey, you,” Luciella whispered, as if to herself, sitting atop my broom, staring off into the distance. “I want...you know... I want a place where I belong. Somewhere I can relax and live my life.”

I just stared in the direction we were heading as I answered, “You say that, but...can’t you be any more specific?”

“I’d like a place that’s peaceful, where the people are nice—the kind of place that will accept me.” She nodded to herself in understanding. “And most importantly, a place where I can sleep securely would be the best!”

“Well then, how about the Land of Hospitality, where we spent all of yesterday?”

I could hear her snort-laugh through her nose. “Nah, not there. A place like that would ruin me. Especially my tongue.”

“Spicy food really isn’t your thing, huh...?”

As I was speaking, I suddenly remembered something.

The night before, I had stayed up very late, but I had eventually surrendered to drowsiness and exhaustion and fallen asleep earlier than Luciella.

This morning, when I had awoken, she was already awake, so it was possible that Luciella hadn’t slept properly at all the night before.

“What’s the next place like?”

She tilted her head.

I shook mine.

“I think you probably won’t care for this one, either.”

Especially if your desire is for a peaceful, secure place where you can sleep.

Because the next place is known as...

...the Land of Magical Munitions.



The witch who had once squared off against the dragon was named Natasha, but in the Land of Magical Munitions, she was identified by the official moniker, Natasha the Great and Powerful, and if you knew what was good for you, you wouldn’t call her anything else. The people of that country worshipped the witch Natasha. She was more than a character in a fairy tale—she was a religious icon.

Consequently, there were statues and books and assorted goods related to Natasha the Great and Powerful, all over town.

The main avenue alone was lined with several dozen cafés that each claimed to be “a favorite spot of Natasha the Great and Powerful.” Similar catchphrases aimed at luring customers in could be seen on display in front of hotels and street stalls, as well as clothing boutiques, weapons vendors, magic shops, hardware stores, and many others. Too many shops to count had Natasha the Great and Powerful’s name plastered on them. It made me wonder just how many of the shops the witch Natasha had actually patronized and how she could have so many favorites. I mean, where was the brand loyalty? Not that

anyone there would have voiced such criticism. Natasha the Great and Powerful was an untouchable figure here.

When she saw all this, the dragon Luciella was taken aback.

“Ugh...what’s with this country...? It’s awful...”

She recoiled.

There was a witch standing right beside her, ready to explain, wearing a self-satisfied look the whole time, unconcerned about her feelings.

Who could that have been?

That’s right, it was me.

“Long, long ago, in the distant past, when a dragon—that’s you—began its terrible rampage, there was one country that managed to mount a resistance faster than anyplace else. Day by day, they strengthened their weapons and magic spells and fought against the dragon. Don’t you remember any of that, Luciella?”

“Not one bit,” she replied as she walked along beside me. Luciella shook her head readily. “After all, before I met that witch, I didn’t come up against any foes worth remembering. Just a sour welcome’s all.”

In short, the people’s attacks hadn’t had the slightest effect.

“It’s probably a harrowing story, if we could hear it from the people who lived here at the time...”

“.....” At this point, Luciella came to a sudden halt. “Well, the folks here don’t seem to remember me too well, either, so that goes for both of us.”

We were standing in front of a bookstore.

Lined up in its window were many legends of the witch Natasha.

...No question that’s what they are. But do they really need so many?

There were cute, illustrated tales of the witch Natasha and the dragon aimed at children, and all sorts of more dramatic comics were aimed at adults. The strangest thing was that none of the dragons depicted on the book covers looked the same. They had silvery-white scales, or red scales, or black scales,

and the size and appearance of the beast varied wildly.

“And yet they remember *her*. Everyone in this country remembers that witch perfectly.” Luciella’s eyes narrowed as she lightly traced a finger over the cover of a book.

The appearance of the witch Natasha was always very consistent: black robe, black triangular hat, orange hair. Her look had become iconic.

“Well, hello there! Would you happen to be sightseers?” A clerk poked her face out from inside the shop, maybe because she had seen us standing at the storefront. “Oh-hoh-hoh. You’ve got a discerning eye to spot our humble little bookshop. I take it that the two of you are Natasha fans? That’s wonderful! You don’t have to tell me; it’s written all over your faces! I can tell just by looking at you! You ladies are practically overflowing with the naïveté of fresh fans!”

I mean, I don’t think anybody would want to visit this place if they weren’t already a fan...

“...Are there any books you’d recommend?”

“Oh-hoh-hoh. What a strange thing to ask. Why, I’d recommend every book in the store!”

“.....” I was feeling fairly irritated by the clerk’s strangely high energy when Luciella spoke up.

“Hey, lady. I want to know about this woman. Got any books that’ll help with that?”

“Oh-hoh-hoh. In that case, I recommend this one. This is the best one if you really want to get to know Lady Natasha.”

As she was saying that, the clerk pulled out a book.

How to Go from Broke to Billionaire in One Second A Record of Natasha’s Struggles

Luciella knocked the book to the ground.

“Do I look like I’m obsessed with money?!”

“Goodness, I’m sorry. I suppose this book is geared toward advanced

students...”

“What the hell is an advanced student...?” Luciella muttered.

“I think you’ll find that it’s a special class of loser...,” I explained.

Both of us were grimacing.

The clerk, on the other hand, seemed entirely unconcerned.

“For beginners, I recommend this book.”

She coughed, clearing her throat in a forced way, then presented us with another book.

A Case of Dragon Murder There Is Always a Single Truth to Be Found

Luciella knocked the book to the ground.

“When did that witch become a detective?!”

“Well, actually, no one ever heard from her again after she defeated the dragon, so...a rumor went around that she started solving mysteries...”

The clerk chuckled as she picked the book up.

According to the clerk, after Natasha disappeared into thin air, her most enthusiastic fans pushed wild theories to build on her legend, until the witch’s image had become incredibly overused.

“In this novel, Lady Natasha visits the present day, and the strongest magic of our time is no match for her. Present-day mages are quite inferior to mages of her time...as it turns out.”

“So in short, it’s a book where she’s a big, dumb, lazy fish in a small, stupid pond. I see.” Luciella nodded.

“In this work, it goes the other way, and the protagonists go through a time slip into Lady Natasha’s era, where they get her to eat their modern-day cooking and live in unparalleled luxury because of their modern knowledge and artistry.”

“Don’t people read anything that doesn’t revolve around her?”

“Books sell well if Lady Natasha’s in them, so...”

“So most of you lot in this country are head over heels for her...?”

“.....” Suddenly, the unflappable store clerk got a faraway look in her eyes. “When you’re a legend like Natasha, your image is timeless...”

In other words, the famous Lady Natasha was an out-of-copyright character and could be used by writers however they liked.

There was such a thing as being too popular.

“What is going on...? I want to know what kind of person she was, but I still don’t have the slightest idea...” Luciella was at a loss. “I can’t understand it... Why do the people from this time turn everyone from the past into a plaything...?”

To Luciella, who had actually lived in the distant past and faced off against Natasha, the modern-day treatment of the witch certainly must have seemed bizarre. It probably made her uncomfortable to be surrounded by lies.

However...

“Most people living today don’t really care about the truth of events in the distant past,” I said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Only the events they witness with their own eyes are real to them.”

It didn’t matter what the real Natasha had been like. If the story was interesting, that was good enough. Historical accuracy clearly wasn’t a concern, so they were able to use her image as they liked.

“I wonder what kind of witch she was after all.” We had left the bookstore behind, and Luciella grumbled beside me as we turned our search toward lodging.

“How does Natasha seem to you right now?” I turned to face her.

After humming in thought for a moment, she said, “Like a time-slipping companion to future people who changed sexes and flew into a parallel universe to become a detective. A mythical figure who’s been the subject of all kinds of tall tales.”

“When you put it that way, I guess her fans have really embellished her lore, haven’t they...?”

“Sure have...” Luciella paused for a moment, then said, “But y’know, I get the same treatment in every story.” In a defeated tone of voice, or as if everything was clear to her, she said, “In every single one of them, I’m the villain.”

At that moment, her voice sounded impossibly lonely.

Luciella didn’t sleep properly that night, either.

No matter what I said, she just smiled and answered, “I’ll be fine after a quick nap,” and then spent the whole night reading books about the witch Natasha.

She was searching for somewhere she could rest safely, but this country was definitely not the place for her. Now she was in a fragile human body rather than her original dragon form. She was no match for simple drowsiness and frequently narrowed her eyes and let out a big yawn, but even so, she never got into her futon.

In the end, no matter how many times I told her to, she wouldn’t try lying down in bed, so eventually, I gave up.

“...I’m sure you’ll like the next country,” I muttered, mostly for my own peace of mind, as I slipped into bed.

“...That would be nice.”

Her voice sounded a bit like it belonged to someone finally surrendering to sleep.



The following day.

The country that we arrived at next was known as the Land of the Wall.

Long, long ago, before Luciella the dragon had ever appeared in this region, the people there had built a huge wall and suddenly cut off all contact with neighboring nations, so it had come to be called by that name, but there was no trace of that left now.

They had chipped away at the huge wall that had been used to intimidate and isolate, until it shrank down to about the same height as a normal gate. The gate, which had been shut tight before, now stood open always.

It was said that of all the countries in this region, this one had changed the

most since the olden days.

Formerly, it had been under the control of a people known as the elves. It had been a fairly exclusionary and rather insular country. Since elves couldn't use magic, they had only the wall to protect them from outside invaders.

But now that was all in the past.

Now lots of different kinds of people came and went down the avenues of this city. There were humans, and elves, and mages, and beastkin, and even demons to be seen. All types of people lived here now, and the barriers between species had ceased to exist.

Frankly speaking, it was a really fantastic place.

Even to me, arriving for the second time, it was fantastic enough that I had the same unrefined reaction as before.

"Welcome, travelers! Here, take these!" As we walked through the town, two small girls with golden hair and long ears—elves—approached us with freshly baked cookies. "We baked them at our shop! If you like them, come buy more from us, okay?!"

Then the elves disappeared like a passing storm.

"U-um...?" Bewildered by the cookie that had suddenly been pushed on her, Luciella looked at me. "Hey, this isn't actually super spicy, is it...?"

"It's a normal cookie." I was already munching away on my cookie as I nudged her. "They walk around handing them out for advertising. Don't worry about it."

I was calm, but Luciella was still confused.

"Advertising...? But those girls were only about ten years old! Are you telling me they make little kids like that work in this country?"

"I met those same girls last time I was here, and they are fully grown adults."

"Huh?"

"Elves mature slowly. They're about fifty years old when they come of age. And it's said that they can easily live for several hundred years after that. I've even heard that there are some long-lived elves who make it to one thousand."

“.....” Luciella’s eyes widened in surprise. “Well then, just how old were they? Those two girls?”

“Thirty, apparently.”

“Thirty-year-olds pretending to be ten, huh...? That’s a bit much...”

Luciella stared intently into the distance.

I didn’t think the elves would have appreciated being told off by a several-hundred-year-old dragon pretending to be an eighteen-year-old girl, but I didn’t feel like arguing with her right then.

“But there aren’t very many of that long-lived species, huh? Most of this country is made up of people from other places, isn’t it?”

As far as we could tell by looking around town, it was all beastkin with thick fur, normal humans (including mages), and demons openly sporting their wings and fangs. For a place that was originally a land of elves, the natives were fairly hard to spot.

But that was only to be expected.

“After the wall was torn down, most of the elves feared for their lives and fled the country. They can’t even use magic, so they had been living safely inside the wall, but after it was destroyed, they had no option but to flee. The elves who are in this country today are the brave souls who chose to stay behind, or probably their descendants.”

“...Is that so?”

“To make up for their population shrinking, this country welcomed all kinds of people. These days, the country is flourishing, as you can see, but apparently, there were many disputes of all kinds to get to where it is today.”

Though I’ve only heard bits and pieces, so I don’t really know that well.

“So you’re saying that there are lots of people who resent me in this country, too?” Luciella let out a single sigh, then said, “So ultimately, no matter where I go, it’s the same story. I was supposed to be wandering around searching for a place to belong, but the only thing I know after going from country to country is that I don’t belong anywhere.”

“.....”

Her words sounded like an attack on me for so casually saying, *“I’m sure you’ll like the next country.”*

“The way I saw it, there was no place more dazzling than the human world.” Narrowing her eyes, Luciella watched the people going about their daily lives. “After I was driven from my homeland, I traveled alone for a long time. That was the reason why I came to visit the countries in this region.”

And then, in a wistful voice, she told me her story.

“I just wanted to become friends with the humans.”



Unloved by anyone in her homeland, Luciella had set out on a search for some place where she could belong.

However, cutting straight to the point, her wish never came true.

One reason was simply that there was no country tolerant enough to accept her. She could sense before she reached a place that she would not be welcomed.

She passed through all sorts of countries, searching for a place she belonged, but no matter where she went, no matter who she met, her species and form were too different, so there was no one who was willing to accept her.

Far from it, she was rejected everywhere she went.

“Get outta here, you monster!” Sometimes, people threw rocks at her and showered her with jeers.

“Never set foot in our country again!” Or they would point weapons at her and blast her with magic spells.

Still, she was alone, a solitary beast.

She was never welcome anywhere. There was no place for her. Ultimately, the outside world wasn’t at all different from her homeland.

She suffered for a long time as she searched for a place that would accept her as she was.

However, she was never able to find one.

After wandering on and on, it became clear that no matter how she struggled, she had no choice but to live a solitary life. In that era, the people living in that region would never be able to accept her.

No one loved her, and she had no one to love.

She was certain that she had been born before her time.

Eventually, she gave up on everything.

Then, as everyone already knew...

As the legends stated...

In the woods...

She could do nothing but stay there, all alone, forever.



“I tried so many times to make friends with the humans. But my words didn’t get through to them. Every attempt I made at being nice failed.”

She laughed dryly from beside me.

The only reason Luciella had returned to this region again and again was that she wanted to make friends with the humans. That was all. She kept visiting their cities, all in an effort to better understand them.

But she hadn’t been able to, and they hadn’t been able to understand her, either.

From the people’s perspective, she was nothing more than a monster.

From her perspective, the people were simple creatures possessed by fear, who came at her with weapons ready.

“Only *she* seemed to look at me with different eyes.”

The witch Natasha.

Only she could stand and face Luciella fair and square, without fear. In her eyes, Luciella probably saw a human who stood on equal footing with her.

“Ultimately, I never figured out what she was thinking. And even after going

to that country yesterday, I still don't understand anything about her."

I think that's just because all of the legends about her have gotten all twisted and wrong...

"What are you planning to do once you know about Natasha?"

"What were you planning to do once you knew about me?"

"Uh... Um, well, I wasn't really planning to *do* anything. I was just interested in you."

It's not like I could tell her that it was because I smelled a moneymaking opportunity...

"Same for me, then. I was just interested in her."

"....."

I looked back at her silently, and she smiled faintly at me.

"I had the tiniest bit of hope that she might be like me and want to become friends—"

But the ending that had awaited Luciella and Natasha turned out to be four hundred years of silence.

"Now I guess I'll never know what she was thinking."

I suppose she was feeling as if Natasha had somehow left her behind—like she had been abandoned.

No matter what the events of the distant past, her real motives had ultimately been nothing more than those of a lonely dragon who had wanted to make friends. No matter what she had looked like back then, now she was just a sad girl.

"You've taken good care of me," she said. Then Luciella suddenly stopped. "Enough already. Apparently even now, after four hundred years have passed, the world seems to be telling me that it's best for me to be alone. I'm grateful to you for traveling with me this far. But enough already."

"....."

"I'm sure I've been a burden. I want to do something to thank you, but

unfortunately, I don't have anything. As you can see, I'm penniless. Well, please take the many old tales I've told you on our journey in place of souvenirs. Surely you can make a little money if you turn my experiences into a book or something?"

"I'm sure I could..." I replied vaguely. "But considering the clothes and meals and lodgings I paid for, well...you see...?"

"Huh? What's your deal? Are you trying to say that won't be enough? Do you intend to steal even more from me when I have nothing?!"

"No, no. I don't have any such intention! It's just, if we part like this...you see? I just feel like something is missing..."

"Oh-hoh-hoh!"

I let out a laugh. Perhaps from Luciella's perspective, I might have looked like I was wearing a fairly evil expression.

"Huh? So what is it? What do you want?" she asked me very, very aggressively.

"I don't want anything from you," I answered bluntly. "But instead, before we part ways, will you accompany me for one more shopping trip?"

Then I walked off, pulling her by the hand.

Because the middle of a crowded street was no place for a proper good-bye.

"...What the hell? You must really like books."

I dragged Luciella somewhat forcefully by the hand, and the place we finally arrived at was a bookstore in a corner of town. It wasn't so much a long-standing shop as it was simply old, and its shelves were lined with rows of books that had probably been new at some point.

It was an extremely plain building, the type of bookstore that, to be uncharitable, didn't leave much of an impression.

You could say that this shop sat at the exact opposite end of the spectrum from the bookstore we had visited the day before.

"If we're going to part ways, I thought that here would be appropriate," I

answered quietly.

“It’s got no charm...” Sounding disgusted, Luciella stepped into the shop. “It’s not like I’m going to learn anything about that witch in a place like this.”

Her objection was kind of lifeless, as if she had already given up on learning about the witch Natasha.

Or maybe she had given up on living in this country—or on humans entirely.

“.....” I just kept silent and moved behind Luciella as we made our way through the narrow, cramped bookshelves that leaned in like they were trying to hug us.

Volume after volume of musty old reference books were lined up on the shelves. Unlike the shop we had visited the day before, there wasn’t a single novel of the sort that would be ideal for killing time. This bookstore was packed full of stiff, formal tomes.

One could say it was a faded little shop that no ordinary sightseer would ever enter.

But one could also say it was such a dull little shop that even the local people weren’t interested. It had been completely forgotten.

It’s not that it was an unpleasant place. But sure enough, it had no panache. It was the sort of shop that if a customer wandered in, they would just as soon wander back out.

“.....”

Inside that unremarkable shop, Luciella, who had been walking in front of me, suddenly stopped dead.

She halted, her gaze captured by something deeper in the store—by the lone clerk who had come out from a back room.

“Goodness, hello there.”

The old woman put on a good-natured grin and spoke as if she had seen right through us. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

You can tell?

I didn't have to ask. I knew immediately that she could tell.

She knew that I was someone who had come here from afar.

And she knew exactly who the girl standing in front of me was.

"...You are..."

And Luciella, too, in the same way, must have recognized the old woman before her eyes. She had pure white hair that had lost all of its color. Her face was covered in wrinkles and retained only the slightest hint of her former looks. Her clothes had lost any structure they might have once had.

Standing there was just an ordinary old woman, no more and no less.

But the moment Luciella laid eyes on her, she understood who it was. Ignoring any logical reasoning, she felt it intuitively.

"I'm sure I told you yesterday. 'You'll like the next country' I said."

Those words had not been a lie. I'd said them because I genuinely believed them.

Because living here in this country was the famous witch Natasha.



It had happened the first time I'd come to this country.

A mysterious old woman had appeared before me and told me an odd story.

It was a legend that had been handed down since ancient times about a dragon that rampaged around the region and the witch who eradicated it.

The woman was much better informed than any of the books I had read and told me the story as if she had been there at the time to see the events unfold. As she recounted the legend, her story was much more vivid than the ones written in the books.

"...Why do you know so much about this?"

I tilted my head questioningly, and the old woman smiled. "Because I'm Natasha, of course."

She said that as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

After sealing the dragon away, the witch Natasha set off for a while on a journey of her own. She disappeared and spent some time alone. She saw the wider world and experienced all sorts of cultures.

And then, before too long, she came to live in the Land of the Wall.

She gave up the witch life and became an ordinary person. And so, she enjoyed a quiet life here in this country.

Although, after the intense battle against the dragon, most of the people had fled, leaving the country devastated, she had told me.

So with the dragon Luciella sealed away, she turned her efforts to rebuilding the country. She tore down the great wall and removed restrictions to make it a place where all species and different kinds of people could live together.

Apparently, Natasha had not actually intended to go into hiding, but she got lost in the mix when the country opened its borders. People everywhere must have assumed she had gone missing.

“You know, whenever I think back to those times, it pains my heart.”

In the middle of her reminiscent story, she told me, “Back then, there was nothing I could do except to confront the dragon and seal it away. After everything that had happened, the dragon never would have been forgiven, you see. So I had to do it, or the world would have been torn apart by strife.”

“However...,” she added, “I didn’t believe that the dragon was evil, truly. I wondered if it was actually trying to make friends with us humans. Maybe it just wanted to live with us.”

So for that reason, Natasha hadn’t killed the dragon. Instead, she had sealed it away. At the same time, she had placed a spell on the seal that would transform the dragon when it awoke so that it would no longer trample whole cities underfoot. Of course, magic powerful enough to transform a full-grown dragon would take a great deal of time to work, she said. About four hundred years, in fact.

“I don’t know whether the dragon wished for that to happen or not. It was nothing more than a hunch, but somehow, I got the feeling that the dragon did want to become human.”

They had never exchanged any words and had only ever met in battle.

However, somehow, their hearts must have communicated.

“Miss Traveling Witch, do you think I could get you to ask that dragon about her real intentions?”

It turned out that Natasha had drawn me deep into the shop with a promise to tell me a story from long ago just so that she could make this request of me. I’ve always been a sucker for indulging strangers.

“If you’re wondering about a reward, I can compensate you fairly. I’ve got enough savings that I can live securely without worrying about money until I die.”

Natasha tempted me with such sweet words.

“...Where is this dragon?”

And I easily gave in to temptation.

However, I did have one question on my mind.

“You’re really sticking by this dragon, but...why? As far as I can tell from hearing the legends, the creature was a real nuisance to humans. A true pain.”

“You’re right...”

Natasha answered my question frankly, like this:

“I suppose it’s because that dragon had the same look in its eyes as me.”

The story she had told me was one of a solitary beast being persecuted in its homeland, driven out, and then wandering through the world, searching for a new home.

It was the sad tale of someone who, in the end, *had no choice but to live alone in the forest.*

At the end of the day, from start to finish, every beat of their stories was the same.

The beast’s story, when all was said and done, was Natasha’s story, too.

And it was exactly what had happened to Luciella.



“I was originally born in this country, you know. Though I may be old now, and my hair has completely lost its color, once upon a time, it was a beautiful bright orange.”

Natasha brushed her hair away from her ears. They were long and delicate, characteristic of an elf. She had been born in an elven country, but born of a union between elf and human, and had been detested and feared by her own people.

Most importantly, with her unusual appearance, neither elf nor human, she wasn't accepted in this country or any other.

And so, for the longest time, she had lived alone.

This was the woman whose forest home had been surrounded, four hundred years prior, by groveling emissaries from every surrounding nation, desperately pleading with her to exterminate the dragon.

At the time, Natasha had thought this could be her chance. She was sure that if she put them in her debt, she would finally be on good terms with the humans.

However...

“When I looked into your eyes, I knew.” Natasha put her hand on Luciella's head. “I knew that you had also been suffering, just like me. I could see it in your eyes.” She continued, “You had the eyes of someone tortured by loneliness.”

So after Natasha had sealed the dragon away, she spent the next four hundred years remaking this country that was her homeland.

She had guided it into becoming a fantastic city that accepted people of all different species.

Even though Natasha's physical existence had faded from the memories of the people here, even if the dragon had been forgotten, dismissed now as nothing more than a legend, Natasha alone never forgot, and she continued waiting for four hundred years.

“You really are the biggest fool...”

Luciella reached up to the top of her own head. She took Natasha's wrinkle-covered hand and pressed it against her cheek.

As if to confirm the realness of it with her human skin.

"You went to all that trouble just for me? You waited for me, until you shriveled up like this? What a fool...", she said.

In response, Natasha smiled and shook her head.

"I didn't do it just for you," she answered gently. "I did it all *for my own sake*."

For herself, and for her mirror reflection, Luciella.



"Hmm, something's a little...off..."

At a certain publishing house.

After he had finished reading the manuscript I had brought with me to submit that day, the editor made a sour face and hummed to himself for a while, then tossed the manuscript onto the table and gestured wildly with both hands as he said, "Okay, hear me out. Reviving the dragon into the world four hundred years later is an interesting plot point, all right? I think that's great. But the thing is...why is she a beautiful girl? The dragon would be great as a guy, right? And you have the witch Natasha as an ordinary old woman, but that's also a bit of a stretch. I mean, she's long dead, right? And to have the protagonist be a young witch, I mean..."

"Uh-huh..."

"If our publishing house is gonna put this out, first of all, the dragon has to look like it used to in the past, not like a beautiful girl, and also you have to make Lady Natasha go through a time slip from the past to present day. And the protagonist can't be a girl; make it a handsome guy. And arrange for there to be at least three girls who are the supporting heroines. And this goes without saying, but all of them should be totally head over heels for the protagonist."

"Wait, but that's totally unrealistic..."

"Hey now, the manuscript that you just had me read isn't gonna cut it, y'know?"

“.....”

“There have been so many novels handling the subject of the witch Natasha so far that the people are sick of them... Everything I just suggested is what the readers of today *really* want...”

“.....”

They say that truth is stranger than fiction, but in reality, if the truth is too strange, it seems indistinguishable from crude fiction. I went around to several different publishers and let them read my account of recent events, which I had summarized into a novel, but there wasn't a single person who appreciated the story.

It was a praiseworthy tale, but one which could only be shared between two people.

“Let's see. Actually, let's make the protagonist a reincarnation of the witch Natasha. Then she'll have the power to defeat the dragon right from the start. How about that? That's new, isn't it?”

“No, actually, I think it's about as used up as an old dustcloth.”

After giving a perfunctory thank-you, I collected my manuscript and left the publishing house behind.

Several days had passed since I parted from Luciella.

Time was passing busily as always in the Land of the Wall, a city where there were humans, and elves, and mages, and beastkin, and even demons to be seen, where there were no walls between species, where everything felt new and everything felt nostalgic.

“.....”

As I was heading for the gate, and a return to my solo journey, I suddenly came to a halt.

I had caught sight of a small bookshop.

It was a snug little store that didn't seem like the kind of place most tourists would take an interest in—the kind of small, drab shop that even the locals had forgotten about.

I stepped right in.

There was a nostalgic aroma hanging in the air.

In the back of the shop, an old woman wearing a gentle expression was seated politely with her legs tucked under her, waiting with a smile. “Oh, welcome!”

Before she could continue, I said, “Here, take this,” and pushed the sheaf of papers that was my manuscript toward her.

“.....?” As she took it, the woman tilted her head curiously. “What’s this?”

“Your shop doesn’t seem like it’s aimed at pleasure readers, so I’ve decided to make a donation,” I answered frankly.

As a novel, it’s probably not very interesting, but I bet it’ll suit this store full of stuffy tomes pretty well.

The woman looked over the manuscript and immediately looked back up at me.

“...You’re selling this?”

“No. Please do whatever you like with it. You can throw it away or sell it; I don’t care. I’m leaving it up to you.”

I just don’t want you to forget.

Don’t forget that someone out there remembers that the two of you are living here, even if everyone else here forgets about you and the story gets handed down as a mere legend among the people of this region.

Don’t forget that even when one of you eventually reaches the end of your life, you mustn’t return to solitude.

...And so on.

Pushing such sentimental thoughts down into the depths of my chest, I said jokingly, “Well, the reward you gave me was a little much, so I wanted to give a little something back, that’s all.”

“...I see,” Natasha answered, holding the manuscript like it was something precious. “In that case, I’ll take good care of it.”

By the way...

“...Where did Luciella go?”

My eyes swept over the shop but didn't catch sight of the other key character—the dragon, Luciella.

I had heard that after she had parted with me, Luciella had started working at Natasha's bookstore, but...

I don't see her.

“She's right here.”

Natasha pointed at her own lap.

“.....”

Sure enough, there was Luciella.

She had placed her head on Natasha's lap, closed her eyes, and seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

“...She looks comfortable.”

So comfortable that I found myself whispering.

“...Yes.” Natasha nodded quietly as she stroked Luciella's hair.

When she touched her hair, Luciella murmured softly and turned to face upward, but didn't wake.

I'm sure she's not going to wake up for a while.

Right now, she's in a place where she can sleep securely.

Just like a child after getting a parent to read them a bedtime story, Luciella was sleeping soundly.





CHAPTER 7

Many Years' Journey: Autumn in the City Is Harsh for a Country Girl

For the longest time, I have wanted very badly to become a mage.

It all started with a book that someone read to me when I was small. The mage in the story was strong and cool, and magic seemed pretty handy, and I wasn't actually sure what kind of people mages were, but somehow, they seemed amazing. It was the simple aspiration of a young girl prone to daydreaming, but right about the time of my eighth birthday, I came to view this single dream as my sole purpose in life.

On that day, I had an encounter that would change the course of my life forever.

When I broached the subject of wanting to become a mage to my father, he was vehemently opposed: "What'n tarnation are you carryin' on about, girl? Ain't no sense in all that hootenanny! (dialect)"

As for my mother, she said, "Huh...? Must be somethin' wrong with the girl. Y'feelin' sick, hunny? (dialect)" and worried about the thoughts that were filling my head.

But that was only to be expected.

The real beginning of my journey to become a mage was a trip my family took to the big city in celebration of my eighth birthday. That was the origin of it all.

Huh? What kind of gift is it to take your only daughter on a trip to the city for her birthday...? I wondered that at the time, but the sightseeing was actually pretty fun.

It was the first city I had ever seen, and it was lined with rows of tall buildings. Coming from our hometown, where most houses were only one story and the tallest building I ever saw had just two stories, this city seemed like a metropolis for the rich and famous.

And I was there, wondering aloud at how amazing it was that people could live in such tall buildings without them toppling as my parents pulled me along by the hand.

“Here, Alte, look at this.” My father pointed to a nearby building. “That’s the house of a rich person who lives in the capital.” (I remember he spoke in very polite language so that the people around us wouldn’t realize we were country bumpkins.)

A moment later, the entire city block exploded.

“.....”

“...Papa, can ya use magic? (dialect)” I looked at my father quizzically, but of course, that wasn’t the case.

Someone told me this after the fact, but that day, in the city that we were visiting—a place called the Commonwealth of Latorita—apparently some sort of monster went on a terrible rampage.

Huge icicles were flying through the air, buildings were crumbling and being blown away, and explosions were reducing whole sections of the city to rubble. This was definitely not a typical day in the big city. And apparently, it was all because of an angry monster.

The explosion sent my parents into a panic. They screamed and ran away in terror as fire and ice and stone flew through the air around them. I don’t blame them for being terrified. My parents gripped my hands, and I gripped them back tightly as we fled. We slipped into the crowd and just ran.

But suddenly.

“Kyah!”

The swarm of people running around desperately trying to escape pulled my little family apart. In an incredibly unfortunate turn, I had fallen over during our escape.

I could hear my father and mother calling my name in the far distance. A sharp jolt ran up my leg, and from the pain that came just with moving it, I could tell it was no use. I knew I wasn’t likely to run anywhere like that.

But the misfortunes that befell me did not stop there. A building was crumbling around me, threatening to bury me in rubble. It must have been damaged by the monster.

I had no time to prepare myself for death, and I didn't even try to escape my fate. I could only sit there, staring up at the oncoming avalanche in a daze. My body didn't listen to a single command I gave it.

And then, as the sky was blotted out by falling stone...

Crack! A sharp noise resounded.

"Huh...?"

I've never forgotten what I saw next.

A single mage was standing there.

She must have broken the rubble to pieces with a spell. A big lump of rock had fallen in two equal halves to either side of her.

Then the mage looked back at me.

I don't have a good recollection of the face or hairstyle of the woman who saved my life.

"....."

I don't even remember whether she said anything to me.

In my memories, her face and hair, and even her physique, are vague, but I admired her deeply.

From the bottom of my heart, I thought she was so cool.

I thought, *I want to become like this person.*

I longed to be a mage.

I could only stare blankly at her, but then she reached out toward me, touched my head, and patted me gently.

That was probably the moment I fell in love with the idea of mages.

There's a saying that goes "there's no time like the present." That day was a turning point for me. I had always been the kind of girl who rushed headlong

into things, and I began to study about mages as much as I could.

As soon as we had returned from our trip, I started shutting myself away in the only library in our village nearly every day. According to what I had heard, there was a school for magic in the Commonwealth of Latorita, the place I had visited with my parents, and people could go learn magic there.

So I started training. There wasn't a single person around to help teach me, but if I wanted to attend that school, I had to study, so I practiced hard and eventually learned to use the lowest-level spells. It was honestly a surprise to discover that I had some magical talent.

My parents were against it. They thought that wanting to be a mage was nonsense. After the incident in the city, they had decided that the countryside was definitely the best, and I could tell it would be very difficult to persuade them. However, I never stopped studying, and when I mentioned that I was planning to pay for my own tuition, they quickly came to see it my way.

I stood before my concerned parents. "All right, y'all just watch," I said, tossing my chestnut-colored hair dramatically. "I'm fixin' to become a top-notch mage. (dialect)"

That had all happened exactly half a year ago.

And today.

"If this continues, we will have no choice but to expel you from this institution."

Inside an empty school building. The scenery outside was a rich red color.

Only I, one other student, and one teacher sat in a classroom where usually several dozen students would be tightly packed and studying spells.

Sighing heavily in exasperation, the teacher delivered the news. I had the questionable distinction of having gotten failing marks in every subject on the most recent round of exams.

"Huh? Expelled...? Seriously...?"

That was my reaction at the time. My mouth hung open dully, and that's what I said.

“No matter how you look at it, with these grades...” The teacher shrugged. She seemed ready to give up, as if I was beyond hopeless.

“Is it really that bad...?”

“It’s safe enough to say that it is. Your grades in the general curricula were especially catastrophic.”

“Oh...” I was in tears.

But there was a whole list of reasons why my grades were this bad.

The exams had covered eight general education subjects and only four specialty subjects. For some reason, the general education repertory at Latorita State University was quite rich. In the past, when there were a lot of students, the general course and specialty course had apparently been separate. Also, the relative abundance of general education courses was a relic of that time.

“But I wouldn’t have failed if it were just the specialty courses... It’s all because there are too many general subjects...” I wanted to get out at least one complaint. I was in the worst mood. “I don’t even understand why we have to study the general courses in the first place... Math class is just memorizing calculations and formulas that don’t seem likely to help us in the future, and philosophy is just a bunch of prudish adults twisting and bending things that are dead obvious into strange turns of phrase to make themselves seem smart, and history class is just reciting the history of this country on and on like some kind of chant, isn’t it? None of this improves my motivation...”

To summarize, I was saying, *“I want to become a splendid mage! But I have no interest in general education!”*

The teacher just frowned at me as I was grumbling out my poorly laid arguments.

“The things you learn here certainly will be useful in the future. It’s because you think they’re a waste of time that you’re wasting your time here.” She sighed. “Are you listening? The reason you’re having trouble is because school isn’t just for studying. It’s a place where you learn all sorts of new things. And you’ll be able to learn things in all sorts of different fields because you’re also studying how to study.”

“How to study...?” I didn’t really understand. I tilted my head questioningly.

The teacher put up an index finger at me, the dull-witted student.

“The method you use for studying is different depending on the subject, right? For math, you understand the formulas and use them to solve equations, while for history, you hunt down stories of the past. And for philosophy, you need to think about the words of the philosophers and consider their meaning for yourself. Students should spontaneously change how they work depending on the subject matter at hand. Sure, the actual information you study here probably won’t be of much use to you in the future. But you will have cultivated different ways to work. Your experience studying during your time as a student will prime you to seize new knowledge once you’re an adult. In other words, studying is your key to a bright future.”

Then the teacher said, “If you ask me whether or not studying is necessary, I can answer without any hesitation that it absolutely is. Not a single thing in your school life is a waste, Alte.” The teacher spoke indifferently, in a very flat tone of voice, and I couldn’t help but shudder.

In short, what she’s trying to say is, “Someone like you, who can’t even handle the general education curriculum, has a sad life ahead of her if things don’t change.”

Maybe because she sensed how shaken I was, immediately after she said that, she smiled gently and said, “And school is also a place where you learn to meet new people. Do you have any friends?”

“Huh? Why are you asking about that all of a sudden?”

“Spending all your time studying won’t get you very far in life...,” the teacher continued, wearing a slight smile but with a faraway look in her eyes. I didn’t really understand it, but she grumbled, “Those who pour *all* their effort into getting good grades are ostracized by those around them... In order to survive in human society, you also need to learn to be popular... People who only learn to study tend to have difficulty once they’re out in the real world...”

It seemed like something had happened to her in the past. Though I couldn’t ask for more details.

This was probably the teacher's dark side.

"Ah, come to think of it, you've been taking supplementary lessons these past six months, so haven't you made a study buddy or something? If so, then teaching each other the materials would also be good for studying."

What is she talking about?

"Excuse me, Miss. First of all, I don't have a study buddy or whatever," I said, interrupting the instructor.

Today's supplementary lesson was being held in a vacant classroom, and I was the only one there actually being taught lessons by the teacher.

Normally, after-school lessons were held in the school library, but the previous day, someone had snuck into the library in the middle of the night and stolen a book that was not allowed to be taken out, so the school had temporarily closed the library. Many useful reference books were collected there, so surely there were many students who were distressed and annoyed by this temporary closure. Including myself.

Anyway, although she was here in this same classroom with me, the other student was certainly not taking the same supplementary lessons as I was.

The other student.

I shot a fleeting glance her way.

"....." The female student with her purple hair tied up in a single ponytail on the back of her head was staring at her desk, studying quietly. Her cold blue eyes didn't seem to perceive my gaze, and she didn't move in the slightest.

Sitting at that desk was a famous student.

Her name was Linaria.

She was an honors student who had gotten perfect scores on every exam that I had failed.

The day after a round of tests, when the chart of scores was posted up in the hallway, she was always the one standing at the exact opposite end from me, staring at the chart.

In other words, she was a genius. She was also the daughter of a good family. And being gifted with both intelligence and beauty, she was nothing short of perfect. To put it simply, she was far beyond me in every sense.

She was untouchable.

“.....”

I was in a self-pitying slump now that the difference in our positions was so bluntly put on display.

“Alte.” The teacher touched my shoulder and said gently, “By the way... I know this is a different matter, but...when you’re done studying, please take out the garbage. The truth is, the chore was forced on me by the other teachers...”

“.....”

I had been a fool to expect for even a second that she might be coming over to encourage me. Instead, the teacher mercilessly kicked me when I was down.

I think I’m starting to see how she ended up spending all of her time studying instead of making friends...

“Um, aren’t you just asking me to do that because you want to skip out on the job—?”

“Well, you can think of this as a form of studying, too.”

“It’s obvious that you just don’t want to do it—”

“Weren’t you listening? At this school, there is no such thing as a pointless topic...”

“.....”

Don’t think you’ll be forgiven just because you spit out some corny line...!

In the end, the teacher offered to end the study hall early if I agreed to help, so I became an accomplice to her laziness.



At this school, taking out the garbage was a simple job that entailed collecting the contents of the trash cans all throughout campus and tossing them all into

the incinerator behind one of the buildings. Even though you could use a spell to transport huge quantities of garbage all at once, there was still nothing more annoying. Consequently, teachers and students alike hated doing it.

“Okay...think of it as studying how to study...” Telling myself this as I waved my wand, I threw the collected garbage into the incinerator.

Flames engulfed the garbage piece by piece as it was sucked in. The magical flames were turning the garbage to charcoal completely independently. I wasn’t sure where the magical energy was being supplied from, but there were many strange facilities like this on school grounds.

The garbage being tossed in clump by clump. The garbage burning up in the rumbling fire. Me, standing there just watching, with my garbage grades. Suddenly, the fruitlessness of it all threatened to bury me.

“What on earth am I doing in a place like this...?” I asked the incinerator with a sigh. My lukewarm breath made the flames inside it waver ever so slightly.

I had made a big deal about leaving the countryside to study magic in the big city, and before I knew it, I had ended up on the verge of expulsion. I just could not keep up with the classes.

In this predicament, there was no way I would be able to become anything even approaching a splendid witch. Becoming like the mage who had saved my life was probably nothing but a distant, distant dream.

Reality didn’t work out as well as all that.

All I could do was sigh, thinking about my obvious shortcomings, and stare up at the night sky.

“What should I do now...?” I muttered sadly.

Then, it happened.

Whack! With a violent sound, something hit me directly in the forehead.

“Owwwwwwwww!”

A sharp pain pierced my head, and my eyes filled with tears. I crouched down, head low, covering my forehead with both hands and groaning. Something tumbled to the ground at my feet.

Through tear-filled eyes, I saw that it was a silver pocket watch.

Apparently, it was this pocket watch that had struck me when I was already at rock bottom. How annoying!

“Come oooooon! Who’s theeere?! Who’s harassing meeee?!”

I picked up the pocket watch as I got to my feet and glared in the direction of the school building while shouting. However, no one appeared to talk back to this angry country bumpkin.

The school building was uninhabited.

“.....”

The emptiness of it all came back to me again.

The pocket watch bore an archaic design. It probably would have been fitting to call it an antique.

.....

Looks like it might be worth something if I sold it, huh...?

“Alte?” Just then, a voice pierced through the darkness behind me and broke me out of my reverie. “Nice work on the garbage disposal. Thank you.” It was my teacher.

“Oh, what are you doing here, teacher...?”

“Hmm? Did you just put something in your pocket?”

“Huh? I don’t know what you mean.” It was a lie. I had stored the watch away in my pocket. I had shoved it in there reflexively.

“...? Is that so...? Well, that’s fine, but...” The teacher was staring at me with lapis-colored eyes.

“By the way, Alte, are you free right now?”

“Huh? Is there something else...?”

I put myself on guard. But the teacher shook her head. “Ah, it’s not because I want to ask you to do another job. Actually, it’s been decided that the library will be opening up again tomorrow. So I unlocked it today to do some cleaning.”

Apparently, the teacher had been tidying up in the library while I had been throwing away the garbage.



So she didn't just want to skip out on the job, huh...?

"Well, I just got to a stopping point with the cleaning, so how about it? If you like, you can borrow some books. At present, the library is basically deserted, so I think you could borrow whatever you want. Of course, if you go now, you could also read as many of the books that are prohibited from leaving the library as you like."

"Really?!" There was nothing I would have been happier to hear. But... "But is it really all right...? It feels like I'm getting some kind of special treatment..."

I couldn't deny my intense feelings of guilt.

Actually, isn't it normally against the rules to utilize the library under the pretext of cleaning?

"Well, it's my way of saying thanks for taking on garbage duty for me." My teacher smiled slightly and said, "I told you, didn't I? Not one single thing is pointless."



"All right, I'm closing up in an hour, at eight o'clock. Bring any books you want to borrow to me by then. By the way, please keep today's events a secret from the other teachers, okay?"

After putting her index finger to her lips and smiling, the teacher sat down behind the checkout counter and began reading a book.

"All right then, each of you can take care of yourselves, please." She added these perfunctory words.

Each of you...

Meaning that there was someone besides me who was sharing in this not-so-great secret.

"Understood." Linaria gave a simple answer, then hurried off toward the bookshelves. It was truly a cool response.

She's so great.

Apparently Linaria, who had been studying in the back of the classroom a while ago, had also gotten wrapped up in a job after school, just like I had.

She quickly disappeared between the orderly rows of bookshelves so tall that you had to look up—you couldn't possibly reach everything without using a broom or something.

I also bowed to our teacher. "Roger that!" Then I turned on my heel.

Walking all the way to the back of the library between the shelves, I passed a number of locked rooms. In this old library, those rooms gave off even more of a musty scent, containing as they did grimoires filled with grandiose content, and documents covering everything imaginable from the time of the founding of the school up until the present day, and even volumes of recipes for dangerous magic potions.

I opened the door that had HISTORICAL RECORDS written on its signboard and walked in. This was where all of the questions and answers for past exams were stored, together with historical documents related to the school.

Materials like this were generally prohibited from being removed from the library and were usually occupied by other students well before I got a chance, so I hadn't been able to lay my eyes on them before now. I still wouldn't have if it wasn't for this opportunity.

Tracing my finger over the spines of the books that filled the room, I hunted down a particular volume.

A REPORT REGARDING THE MONSTER THAT I SEALED AWAY THE OTHER DAY

Ah, not this one.

REGARDING THE MAGICAL ENERGY SUPPLY SYSTEM AT LATORITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Kinda interesting, but this isn't the one, either.

PAST EXAM QUESTIONS (MATHEMATICS)

Ah, that's about right.

I immediately pulled every book off the shelf that had PAST EXAM QUESTIONS on the spine and set them on the desk in the center of the small room.

".....?" Looking at them, last year's questions—the two most recent volumes of past questions—were the only ones missing.

Maybe they're still being used...?

At any rate, I read and read, devouring every book I could find, and took plenty of notes. I couldn't afford to fail the next exam. At the very least, I had to be scrupulous in my preparations.

I kept studying for as long as time would permit.

Then, in the middle of everything, I suddenly realized...

"...Huh, come to think of it, there's no clock in here..."

I surveyed my surroundings, but I couldn't hear the ticking of a clock. Since this place was going to be locked up after an hour, part of me would have preferred to keep an eye on the time while I read, but...

...I'm in trouble, huh...?

"...Oh!" I touched my forehead lightly. "...I just remembered, I've got that thing I picked up earlier..." I chuckled to myself as I stuck a hand in my pocket.

The antique pocket watch greeted me from inside.

I never would have thought that something I picked up would come in handy so soon...

To borrow the teacher's words, it seems indeed that not one single thing is pointless.

"....."

However, I was forced to revise my understanding the moment I opened the lid of the pocket watch.

"I...can't read it..."

First of all, I didn't really understand how to read the dial on this antique watch. There were way too many clock faces and hands.

How strange...all the clocks I've ever known had just one dial and two hands, but...

Other than that, there were strange buttons and knobs stuck to the side. It did appear to be working, at least for now, but I was at a total loss as to which face was showing the current time. The watch's design definitely gave some

insight into the manufacturer's ego and narcissism.

"Um...? Uh...? I don't get it... What is this thing...?"

I was flustered as I held the pocket watch up to the light, and I tried shaking it and examining it closely and all sorts of other things, but even still, it wasn't clear how I was supposed to read it.

And then...

"Um...?" Tears gradually started welling up in the corners of my eyes as I was completely stymied by how to use the watch. "...Ah!" I pushed one of the side buttons with a *click*.

—Kiiiiii—

The watch made a noise, and one of the faces gave off a bluish-white light.

"Wah-aaahhhhhh!" Thrown into a panic by this sudden development, I tossed the glowing pocket watch out of my hand. Still glowing, it rolled across the table.

A bomb? Did I just set off a bomb?

In a full-blown terror, I ran to a corner of the room, pulling historical documents from the shelf to shield my face...

...but nothing in particular happened. With a whooshing sound, the bluish-white light simply went out, and the small room was cloaked in darkness.

"....."

Is it possible that the button I just pushed was just an ordinary light?

It was the first time I had considered that.

Phew... I'm so easily startled... That really surprised me.

I silently cursed myself.

That was the start of my strange journey.

"...Huh?" I saw that the books I had used as shields were the volumes of past exam questions from the previous year. "...But I was sure they weren't here just a moment ago..." When I went to place them on the table, I met another

strange sight. The mountain of past exam question books that should have been there was gone.

“What on earth...?” When I turned around and looked, all except for the two volumes I was holding were lined up perfectly on the shelf.

Moreover...

The small room I was in had gone dark.

The entire library, in fact, was enveloped in darkness.

Everything felt strange.

“I’m closing up in an hour”—I recalled the teacher’s words. Though it feels like not even thirty minutes have passed...

“What on earth is going on...?!” I shoved the pocket watch back in my pocket and quickly rushed out of the historical records room. In the pitch-blackness, I ran past the looming bookshelves and made my way to the library entrance.

But just as I feared...

The doors were already closed, and no one was there. Not my teacher, not Linaria, no one. It was as if I had been the only one in here the whole time.

Not understanding a thing, all I was able to do was to stand in place.

And then...

At that moment, inside my pocket, I was certain I heard the watch make a clanking sound.

“Alte? ...What are you doing in front of the doors?”

In the blink of an eye, the library was brightly lit again. My teacher was there beside the front counter, frowning.

Was my memory of the pitch-black library a dream? Had it all been an illusion?

“Um...uh...Teacher?”

Feeling bewildered by this unnatural, inexplicable phenomenon, I stared at my teacher. I was trying to ask for help.

“...?” She was still staring at me with a puzzled expression; then she clapped her hands. “Ah! You want to borrow those books?”

She pointed at me.

The books I had used earlier as shields were still in my hands. I had been in such a panic that I hadn’t noticed, but somehow, it seemed I had come out here still gripping them.

“Ah, no... That’s not...what I want, but...”

The words spilled out sloppily, as I still hadn’t managed to collect my thoughts.

“...Goodness.” My teacher narrowed her eyes sharply as she looked at me and said, “...Alte. Those books can’t be removed from the library. It’s forbidden! If you take them out of here, I’m going to get angry.”

Her eyes were still focused on my hands.

“Oh, sorry... I was panicking, and... I don’t actually want to check them out...”

“.....”

My teacher didn’t sound particularly upset, but she tilted her head and asked, while staring at the covers of the books, “Where did you find those anyway?”

“Huh? They were just in the historical records room, but...”

I had only lost control of myself and taken the books out of the room. I didn’t know what to say when asked where I had found them.

“There’s something about them.” She put her index finger to her mouth and hummed as she thought, then said matter-of-factly, “Oh, actually...”



At about eight o’clock, we disbanded.

“All right then, you two, be careful going home.”

The outside world was completely engulfed in darkness. The teacher waved and saw me and Linaria off.

We bowed to her and started for home.

“.....”

That meant walking through town to the student dormitories, where those of us with distant hometowns resided. Apparently, Linaria’s hometown was also far from here because she and I were heading in the same direction.

“.....”

An uncomfortable silence fell between us. I had never spoken to Linaria, or even made eye contact with her, so the very act of walking beside her was somehow stressful for a coward like myself.

That’s how far removed Linaria was from someone like me.

If she talked to me right now, I think I might even die on the spot.

“Say, what’s your name?”

“Eek!” I nearly died right away. I cleared my throat to mask the strange noise I had made and answered, “Ah, um...A-Alte.”

“Okay. I’m Linaria.”

I already knew all about her, but she didn’t seem to recognize me. Though I had expected that to be the case.

“Nice to meet you.” She nodded slightly as we walked.

“Ah, yeah...nice to meet you.” Still nervous, I imitated her.

It had been about half a year since I started attending this school. Since I had spent every day up until now working hard at both my studies and my part-time job, I hadn’t made a single new friend. If things continued in this way, whenever someone asked me after graduation, *“What do you remember from your student days?”* I was likely to find myself in the awkward position of saying, *“Let’s see...garbage duty...I guess...”* I wasn’t sure I could live with myself if it came to that.

However, in that case, might this possibly be my chance? The thought suddenly dawned on me.

Wouldn’t it be good to take this opportunity to chat a little and maybe get to know her? I mean, the girl next to me is the top honors student in the whole

school, right? I could make a friend and a study buddy all in one! That's killing two birds with one stone!

Another version of myself whispered to me inside my own head.

"Ummm..." After some hesitation, I turned to look at her. "Li-Linaria, do you always stay this late—?"

"Ah, I'm gonna go do some shopping, so this is where we part."

Linaria walked off at a brisk pace. I could tell from her cold demeanor that she was not interested in being friends. It seemed pretty clear to me.

"...Waaah..."

I cried alone as I watched her walk away.

Well, Mom and Dad, you were right...

It's not easy making friends in the big city.

I returned to the student dormitory and went straight to my room. After tossing my bag onto my bed, I locked the door. My movement disturbed the daily calendar beside my bed, and the pages fluttered. Even if I hadn't locked the door, I didn't expect anyone to visit the room that belonged to lonely little me, but it was best to be on the safe side.

"....."

With my back to the door, I fished the watch out of my pocket. When I opened the antique silver case, it was quietly keeping the time, among all the many faces that I still didn't understand.

As I stared at this inscrutable object that had suddenly flown at my forehead earlier that evening, I recalled what had happened in the library.

"Oh, actually," my teacher had said as she stared suspiciously at the two books I had in my hands, "those are the books that disappeared from the library earlier. After the uproar over their theft, we ended up having to close the library for a while."

According to my teacher, apparently, all of the books that were not allowed to be removed from the library had an enchantment on them that teleported

them back to their shelves after a day had passed, but somehow, those two particular books had not returned, and it had caused quite a disturbance. The administration had closed the library and waited for them to return, but even so, they had never come back.

It had been like they had disappeared from the world completely.

“Eventually, we gave up on these two volumes and planned to reopen the library, but...there’s something strange about it, isn’t there?”

The teacher shrugged and smiled, then put the books back on the shelf.

“.....”

At this point, I thought maybe...

Let’s hypothesize. Perhaps the strange events that I experienced when I pushed the button on the pocket watch were not a dream or an illusion, but simply reality?

Suppose the pitch-black library had been real?

That would lead me to only one conclusion, would it not?

“Alte. I’ll ask you one more time. Where did you find these two books?” Her hand on the books, my teacher had said jokingly, *“Maybe you went to a past version of the library?”*

Wait, wait, there’s no way I could go back into the past. That’s crazy.

That just couldn’t happen, could it? What was the teacher talking about? If I had such a handy tool, I could use it to master time itself! I would be the greatest mage ever!

Laughing internally, I leaned back against the door and stared at the pocket watch.

If I remember correctly, in the library, I think I pushed the button on the side.

“...No way.”

Half believing and half doubting the possibility, I went ahead and pushed the button again.

And immediately after I did...

—Kiiiiii—

Once again, the watch emitted a bluish-white light.

“.....”

And then, when the light from the pocket watch went out, I saw another strange sight.

The bag that I was sure I had tossed onto the bed had disappeared. In its place was the figure of a person sleeping peacefully in the bed.

“...Heh-heh...whaddaya say? C’mon...heh-heh...”

Another student was there, in my bed, wearing a stupid face and mumbling some nonsense in her sleep (in dialect).

No matter how many times I looked, the girl in the bed was...me.

“...No, no, no...”

This can’t be happening. Is it an illusion?

I was starting to panic. As a test, I pinched myself on the cheek.

“Heh-heh...owwie...”

To be more specific, I pinched the cheek of the version of me who was lying asleep in the bed.

It didn’t seem to be any kind of dream or illusion. I could feel her warm skin between my fingers.

“...Seriously?”

That means this is real.

It meant that the pocket watch I had picked up was capable of jumping into the past. That was the only conclusion that explained what had happened earlier and what I was seeing right now.

“Seriously...?”

I was still incredulous, but as if to give me the final push on the back, my daily calendar stood there quietly beside the bed, displaying the date of several days earlier.

●

Generally, there are two possibilities when an ordinary person falls into a situation where they coincidentally acquire an extremely odd but useful item.

Possibility number one: After experimenting a little and finding out what the thing can do, they throw it away, saying, *“No way! I can’t use such a terrifying thing!”* Most serious and sensible people fall into this pattern.

Possibility number two is getting carried away, like, *“Just think of what I could do with something like this! Hooray! I’ll use it as much as I like!”* Most fools fall into this pattern.

Well then, I think you can guess what I did with the strange pocket watch...

“Okay!”

The following morning, I pushed the button as soon as I arrived at school. To my overwhelming regret, I most definitely fall into the second category. Of course, any fool who gets their hands on an item like that pocket watch is sure to eventually suffer for their hubris, but at the moment, I didn’t have the time to contemplate such philosophical lessons.

I couldn’t forget for a second that I was failing every single subject. I was driven into a corner here. My energy was focused on clutching at this one straw of salvation. If I could use the watch to go back to the past, it was a done deal. I was pressing that button.

It would be no exaggeration to say that day was a turning point in my academic career.

While I was using the pocket watch to return to the past, the hands of time in the present apparently did not progress much. For example, if I pushed the button on the watch just before the start of class, I would be whisked away to the classroom of the past, and even when I returned from my trip, the present class wouldn’t have started yet. In short, I could stretch out a single day in my subjective experience. I could attend classes on my own schedule; it was like the instructors would wait for me. Handy!

Excited by my discovery, I started tinkering with the watch in all sorts of other ways.

I explored how far back I could go and how long I could stay in the past. I tried all sorts of stuff to figure out just what this thing could really do.

“Right. Well then, is there anyone here who knows the answer? We just covered this in our previous class.”

In the middle of history class, the teacher tapped on the blackboard with her wand.

Written there were questions about the names and characteristics of the monster that had attacked the city seven years earlier, speculation about the reason for its attack, and so on. As the students around me were flipping through their notes, I raised my hand right away.

“A golem! A troublesome class of monster with a body animated by magic! The reason it attacked the city is still unclear, but the destruction it caused was a terrible tragedy!”

I had an exhilarated smile on my face.

“That’s correct.” The teacher nodded solemnly. “It seems the last lesson really stuck with you, hmm?”

Well, that’s because you just taught it to me! Ha-ha!

I was openly wearing an expression of triumph.

“Just as she said, there is much about the golem that is still shrouded in mystery. The destruction it caused was considerable. It’s truly incredible that there were no casualties—”

I wore my triumphant look for the rest of class.

Eventually, I learned to use the pocket watch in other ways as well.

“Man, stretching out a single day like that sure is exhausting...” I massaged my stiff shoulders. I had been visiting the past many times in a single day, so physically, it felt like I had lived through several days at once. However, the original day wasn’t even over yet. I still had to go to a neighborhood bakery (the one with the dine-in area) and work at my part-time job.

But if I went like this, I’d be much too tired to work.

No problem!

“Okay!”

I pushed the button on the watch and went back in time. After resting up in the city of the past, I headed for my job. This was another way to use the pocket watch.

That day, I was able to do my work even more briskly than usual.

“Eh-heh-heh, thought so!”

I mean, I just had a nap!

With quick and nimble movements, completely different from usual, I ran circles around the shop, handling all the customers’ orders. I had bidden farewell to fatigue forever and never had to worry about wasting time again.

By the way, that day, I had a familiar customer.

“Good afternoon, Alte.” Standing by the door that had opened with the jingling of bells was a student with a familiar face.

It was Linaria.

“Oh, welcome to our shop!” Now that I could go back in time at will, it was far beyond me to have any kind of inferiority complex. “Are you on your way home now, Linaria?” I wore a carefree customer service smile. If I had been my old self, I don’t think I could have acted like that.

She nodded and replied, “Sometimes, I like to study at a bakery.”

I showed her to a seat, and she glanced at a menu. “One house blend coffee.” She looked at me.

Apparently, that was her whole order.

“Got it!” I was still wearing my customer service smile.

I didn’t really talk to her beyond that, but for me, even that brief interaction felt like I had taken a big step.

After that, I felt like I could do anything. No matter what happened, no matter what I did, it was all in the past, so it didn’t really matter.

I kept fiddling with the pocket watch all day long.

I pushed the button in order to take classes I hadn't been able to take in the past, I pushed the button whenever I wanted a nap, I pushed the button when I wanted to study in the library.

By fiddling with the knobs and moving the hands, I figured out how to go back not just days but years, and even how to manipulate the duration of my stay in the past. Apparently, the reason for having so many watch faces was to keep track of these various time scales.

By the time I had it all figured out, I was practically unstoppable.

"Okay, here's the question. What on earth happened to the fallen golem?"

In the middle of history class, the teacher tapped on the blackboard with her wand. While the other students may as well have had question marks suspended above their heads, as expected, I confidently raised my hand.

"It turned to sand! Up until three years ago, there was a sandpit outside the city made of the remains of the golem, commonly known as the Golem Dunes, but sightseers kept taking sand home as souvenirs, so now it's just an empty field!"

"Correct." The teacher nodded in the affirmative. "Three years ago, someone apparently figured out that they could profit from the sand and then began bottling and selling it. Thanks to them, our country lost one of its premier sightseeing spots. What a scoundrel." She let out a sigh.

As the teacher had said, when I went back in time three years earlier and took a look, there had been someone collecting sand in vials and running a roadside stand with a sign that proclaimed, EXTREMELY RARE ITEM! GOLEM SAND!

The girl behind the stand shouted, "Come and get it! Famous golem sand for sale!"

Well, that girl from the past was me, though! It was only natural that I had been able to answer right away in class. I mean, I was there!

By now, I had ascertained that, for some reason, the further back in time I went, the more time passed when I returned. As a result of going back three

years and staying for several hours, when I came back to the present, about thirty minutes had gone by. Apparently, the device wasn't all-powerful.

But really...thirty minutes was basically nothing!

"Alte, did you know this? I heard that golem sand contains a special magical energy."

"Seriously?"

Linaria had begun to visit the bakery quite frequently. Apparently, the atmosphere in the shop suited her, and she said that it was perfect for studying.

She was often there just before closing, and the two of us would chat.

"Earlier, I was doing some research in the library. Apparently, mages would get more powerful just being in the area around the Golem Dunes."

"Uh-huh..."

"Though, since the tourists bought up all the sand three years ago, there probably won't be another chance to confirm the theory... Too bad, huh?"

She shrugged.

"You really know a lot about golems, don't you?"

What could have attracted so much of her interest?

"Unfortunately, I really don't know that much." She shook her head slowly. "No matter how much I research, there's always so many things about the golem that are unclear. And when it comes to the incident seven years ago, we still don't have any idea where the golem even appeared from. All we know is that it suddenly appeared and suddenly attacked. It might even appear again."

"That's pretty scary, huh?"

I nodded in agreement.

Listen to me, Mom and Dad, I can talk like a real city girl now! And chat with the top honors student at school! Amazing!

"I know. That's why I'm researching them."

I was lost in a moment of deep emotion, but Linaria's voice was flat as she

continued.

“I hate not knowing things.”

She was always so cool.

I kept fiddling around with the pocket watch and learned a lot more about it.

First, the number of years I could go back was way higher than three. I could go back dozens, even hundreds of years. The longest I could stay in the past was about ten hours. Staying any longer than that didn't seem to be possible.

If I went back once per day, returning to three days earlier and staying there for ten hours, physically, that one day would last thirty-four hours for me. However, since there was no limit on using the pocket watch, thirty-four hours was nothing. I could make one day last several hundred hours if I wanted to.

Since I had discovered that going further into the past cost me more time in the present, I decided it was smart to only return to more recent days if possible.

Aside from that, there seemed to be all sorts of other rules to the thing.

Just like the first time I had used the pocket watch, when I went to the past, I was able to bring the things I was holding with me to the future. That day when I had first used the watch, I had pulled two books into the future without realizing I had gone into the past and, as a result, had caused the library to close.

I see, I see. In other words, if I felt like it, I could get my hands on things that aren't being sold in the present day, right? I was grinning suggestively to myself.

“Golem sand! Come and get your famous golem sand!”

To that end, I was set about collecting the remains of the golem, three years in the past. I sold a ton. Enough that I thought I could probably go ahead and quit my part-time job.

In this way, I solved the problem of money and the problem of time in one fell swoop.

“Alte, you seem to be doing really well lately.”

Unfortunately, no matter how many times I went back to the past, I wasn't able to change the awful grades I got on the previous round of exams, so I was still diligently taking supplementary lessons even after acquiring the pocket watch. The teacher's impression of me, however, seemed to have made a complete about-face. "Recently, you seem to be studying with a real passion. I've heard about it from the other teachers, you know? They said you're lively and energetic, like a totally different person."

"Ah, is that so? Eh-heh-heh..."

"If I remember correctly, you're working a part-time job as you attend school, is that right? Are you doing okay?"

"Piece of cake. Right now, I've got so much energy, I feel like I could do anything." I boldly puffed out my chest.

Without any change to her expression, the teacher kept looking at me, then focused on my hand.

"By the way, what's that?"

I was holding in my hand a small vial filled with that rare golem sand. I had collected it from three years earlier.

"Huh? Well, actually..." But there was no way she would believe me if I told her the truth, and it would invite all sorts of other inconvenient inquiries, so I dodged the question. "I got this from a friend. Apparently, this sand stores magical energy."

"Hmm... If this is the real deal, then I think that's amazing, but..." She picked up the vial out of my hand. "I've heard that recently, some wicked person has been walking around selling golem sand and ripping people off. You should be careful, Alte."

"I've already got some, so don't worry about me."

I mean, I'm the culprit, after all...

Though of course I could never admit that.

The day before, Linaria had come to the bakery. Already, it felt like we had been seeing each other almost every day.

“Welcome!” I bowed to her as always. As soon as she arrived at her seat, she answered with “My usual, please.”

I poured her house blend coffee and took it to her.

“You’re always studying. Aren’t you tired?” I set the coffee cup on the table with a clatter.

She looked up at me and answered my question with a question. “You’re always working. Aren’t you tired?”

“Mm...” After a short hesitation, I answered, “I am tired, but I’m also having fun, so it’s not really a hardship.”

Now that I was able to make money selling golem sand, I didn’t need to work a part-time job, but even so, I was still waitressing at the bakery.

When I was always short on time, it had seemed like a demanding and bothersome job. But now that I had all the time in the world, it felt good to spend some time on my feet.

Besides, if I was here, I was able to chat with Linaria.

I wanted to become even better friends with her.

“Right. I’m the same.” Linaria let a smile slip out.

“I hate not knowing things.” I recalled the words she had spoken earlier. *I suppose that for Linaria, studying, satisfying her thirst for knowledge is the thing that gives her a sense of fulfillment.*

“.....”

Supposing I was able to help a girl like that, wouldn’t I become better friends with her? It felt like there was a little voice inside my head whispering to me.

“Ah, Linaria? Here.”

I plunked a small vial down on the table.

It was golem sand.

“Do you remember what you talked about before? Well, I just happened to acquire some, so you’re welcome to it, if you like.”

I offered it to her politely.

“Goodness!” Her blue eyes widened ever so slightly. “So you *just happened* upon such an incredibly rare substance?” Then she peered at me with a piercing gaze. “Maybe you can answer a question for me.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

Startled by her stern gaze, I tilted my head.

And then.

“How many times?”

Linaria stared directly at me.

“How many times have you gone back in time?”



CHAPTER 8

Many Years' Journey: Eternal Engraving

I stood alone in the open space of the bakery (with attached dining room, a concept I didn't really understand), loitering aimlessly. I often stopped by this shop to take a rest on my way home from work. They served delicious freshly baked bread and even coffee. It was a good shop.

I had been teaching at my current post for about six months, and whenever I had any free time, I came here. I was a regular customer, a captive to this bakery's charms.

“.....”

But on this day, I had brought my work with me into this wonderful open space, and I was at my wits' end.

I am not a particularly disciplined person, and I try never to take my work home, but the problem vexing me wasn't the kind of thing I could just set down at the end of the day. So there I was, off the clock and ready to lose my mind.

The conundrum had accompanied me out of the workplace.

“...What on earth could be going on here?”

I gazed at the sand in the small vial.

It was golem sand. Recently, it had become quite a popular commodity. I know there's not always a good reason behind these kinds of fads, but the sudden appearance of so much enchanted sand was more than sufficient to arouse my suspicions.

“No matter how I look at it, it appears to be ordinary sand, but...”

Apparently, many students at Latorita State University had purchased this sand, so I handed over my money and got the vial in return. But no matter how long I stared at it, it looked like ordinary sand.

I wonder if this is really the sand from the stories... Of course, I suppose it could just be fake.

“Oh, Professor, is collecting sand a hobby of yours?”

Setting my coffee down on the table with a *clunk*, the bakery’s proprietor tilted her head quizzically.

“Do you think I would be staring at something like this for fun, Elizabeth? It’s work.”

The bakery’s owner, Elizabeth, still had her head tilted as she made a puzzled expression. “What kind of work has you staring at sand...?”

To explain, I waved my arm and said, “Recently, there has been a lot of demand for this sand. That’s very strange, so I’m investigating. I’ve got orders from the top.”

“Hmm.” Elizabeth didn’t seem especially interested. “The girl who works here part-time had some of that, too. So you mean to tell me that nowadays, college students get their kicks by staring at sand...? I’ll never understand how. I can’t understand how kids these days think... Must be the generation gap.”

“I don’t really think they’re carrying it around because they like to stare at it. Anyway, is the girl you mentioned, the one who works here part-time, named Alte by any chance?”

“Oh, you know her?”

“She’s one of my students.”

“Goodness me,” Elizabeth said. “That’s right, it’s Alte. She gave some of that sand to her friend.”

“Hmm...?”

What’s this? I’m pretty sure Alte told me that a friend had given her the sand... Maybe she regifted it? I wonder what this means.

“So that friend, do you know who she was?”

“Um...” Elizabeth looked up in the air as she was thinking. “Sorry. I don’t know her name, but—she’s started coming in pretty often. She wears her purple hair in a ponytail and seems a little standoffish.”

I immediately knew whom she was describing.

It had to be Linaria.

She was a lone wolf type of girl who was always studying by herself and never seemed to particularly converse with anyone. I remembered her well, as I had recently asked her to help me clean the library.

However, that would mean that Elizabeth had seen her lately with Alte, who not only was always working, but was also not the kind of girl to make friends easily. I thought this was certainly strange.

And over the past few days, Alte's grades had suddenly and dramatically improved, along with some other strange occurrences. There was definitely something going on behind the scenes. But what could all this be leading toward?

I didn't have enough information to see the whole picture yet. All I could do was shake my head.

Well, I'm sure everything will work itself out somehow, I decided optimistically.

I picked up my coffee cup and took a sip.

"But it is strange..."

Elizabeth was beside me, looking perplexed.

"I think Alte went somewhere, even though she's supposed to be working. She was here just a moment ago with that purple-haired girl, but..."

She was staring vacantly at an empty seat, where someone had left a student's schoolbag, a pocket watch, and a freshly poured cup of coffee with steam still rising off of it.

The two girls were nowhere to be found. It was as if they had disappeared into thin air.



"...Go back to the past? Uh, um...I don't know what you're talking about."

My heart was beating fast.

It was like the first time I had walked with Linaria, but it was pounding out an entirely different beat. Cold sweat was trickling down my cheek as a shiver ran

up my spine.

“There’s no use playing dumb,” Linaria told me in a cold voice. “I know everything. Well, I’m not sure where you got the thing, but...you have a pocket watch, right? A silver, antique one.”

“...!”

“You’re a bad liar. I bet you’re honest to a fault.” She glanced downward, looking over my body. “You probably have it on you right now. Where is it? In your pocket, perhaps?”

“...!”

“You’re too easy to read, huh?”

She was sitting in her seat. And I was standing nearby.

The way we were arranged, it was like I was getting scolded in school or something. Linaria carried herself in a way that made her seem much older.

“I’ve been keeping this a secret all along until now, but I’ll tell you something good.”

It was clear to me that usually when someone told me something *good*, and said it like Linaria had said it, it wasn’t actually anything good.

“That watch originally belonged to me. Or rather, it’s more accurate to say that I have one, too.”

She rustled around in her pocket, then set a pocket watch on the table. It had exactly the same design as the one I had.

Sure enough, I could feel my pocket watch in my own pocket as well.

In other words, that means there are two time-travel devices. Wait, but if she was the original owner, then...huh? What on earth is going on here?

I was obviously having trouble keeping up.

“...How did you know I had the watch...?”

“This thing is a time-reversing watch. As you already know, it has the power to send someone back in time. It can take you back one day, ten years, even a hundred years if you were so inclined.”

Sure enough, I had tried all that out, so I simply nodded along.

Gently stroking the small vial of golem sand I had handed her, Linaria continued, “And with the time-reversing watch, you can bring things with you from the past into the future. At the same time, you can take things from the future back into the past. Including the watch itself.”

She told me how the magic worked.

The spell would activate the moment someone pushed the button on the side of the watch, sending the person who pressed it back in time and then returning them to the future after a fixed duration had elapsed. Even if that person somehow lost or discarded the watch in the past, they would still be pulled back to the future after their time had passed.

“I’m assuming that the watch was given to you by someone in the future for some reason.”

No, it fell on me, but...

“Recently, I’ve been keeping you under observation. I knew immediately that you had gotten your hands on the time-reversing watch somehow. Your grades suddenly went up, you started to stand out in class, and on top of all that, you managed to get some golem sand, right? There’s no other explanation.”

I sighed with relief when she told me. Ever since I got hold of the time-reversing watch, she had suddenly started coming to where I worked. I had figured she hadn’t simply been coming to study. I don’t know when it became clear to me, but I had been suspicious of her for some time.

.....

Though if she meant to spy on me, maybe coming openly into the shop was not the best idea. Let’s ignore that for now, though.

Now I felt embarrassed. I had been so happy to make a new friend.

“So that’s how it is. The time-reversing watch was originally mine. Please give it back.” Linaria held out her hand.

But...

“No way.” I took a step back. “Why should I? If there are two time-reversing

watches, then I can have one, and you can have one, and both of us will be able to go back in time, right? I don't have any reason to give it back, do I?"

But Linaria sighed deeply at my meager counterargument and shook her head.

"That can't happen." She opened up her own time-reversing watch, then pushed the side button right before my eyes.

But nothing happened.

Just a lifeless clicking noise.

"It is as you can see. Whenever two time-reversing watches somehow exist in the same place, only the one that was sent back from the future can be used. In other words, its powers cannot be duplicated. So give it back," she said again.

"....."

But of course, I didn't want to give it back. I couldn't give it back. Not after I had finally started enjoying life. Not after I was finally fitting in at school. There was no way I could just throw all that away.

Not even for a friend.

"I see. You don't want to give it back, do you? Fine, then." Immediately after she said that, Linaria yanked hard on my arm and pulled me toward her. "In that case, I'll take it by force!" Then she started searching through my pockets.

"Wait...! Stop, please! What are you doing?!" I grabbed her arm and resisted.

The time-reversing watch tumbled from my pocket, and we both grabbed for it, pulling it back and forth between us in a tug-of-war.

"You're not using it correctly. It belongs in my hands."

"No! You're so stingy! You used the time-reversing watch to improve your grades, didn't you, Linaria? What do you mean by hogging such a handy device all to yourself?!"

"I'm not using it recklessly like you! I'm able to put it to more effective use."

"Even so, I! Said! No!"

We struggled for possession of the watch, neither of us willing to let go.

“Hand it over!”

“No way!”

As we were quarrelling, something...less than ideal happened. The watch began to make an unfortunate rattling sound, and then...

—*Kiiiiii*—

One of us, either me or her, had probably pushed the button by accident. By the time I realized it, the pocket watch was already giving off its bluish-white light.

“...Huh?” I was stunned.

“...Ah!” Linaria frowned.

And then, time was unwinding itself, indifferent to our wishes.



It was almost time to close the bakery, and the two missing students had not returned.

“Wh-what should we do...? Do you think they were kidnapped...?” The bakery’s owner, Elizabeth, was starting to panic, but it was hard to imagine that anyone would be capable of brazenly kidnapping two Latorita State University girls in a shop like this one.

“They’re probably slacking off somewhere together, don’t you think?” I said as I started rummaging through the bag they had left behind, but Elizabeth shook her head.

“Alte’s not the type of girl to do something like that. Besides, the other student who came in today seems like a serious young lady...”

“...Seems that way. Huh.”

All of Linaria’s things were in the bag. Not only her school supplies, but her wallet and her wand as well. It would be hard to imagine her leaving it behind if she’d run off on her own.

“For now, leave this matter to me,” I said as I gathered Linaria’s things. “I’m going to make the rounds and search for them. If I still don’t find them, we can think of another tactic.”

I put everything into the bag—the small vial of sand that had been left on the table, her school supplies, and the pocket watch.

“Please find them...”

Elizabeth was frowning, looking very worried.

I answered, “Leave it to me.” Hoping to put her at ease at least a little bit, I smiled. “After all, it’s a teacher’s job to look out for her students.”



As soon as we saw the scenery before our eyes, it was clear that we had not gone back a mere several days, or even several years.

“.....”

“.....”

Everything around us was different, as far as the eye could see.

We were standing smack in the center of a vacant lot. There was no trace of the bakery (or its attached dining room). Only weeds and sand.

The city also looked strange. We should have been able to see rows and rows of tall buildings, but the only structures around were crude wooden shacks. It didn’t seem like much of a city at all.

In fact, it looked like we were somewhere in the countryside. The scenery made me feel a little nostalgic.

“...No way.” Linaria released me and broke into a run. She was obviously very confused by the sudden change in surroundings.

“How many years into the past did we travel...?” Looking around at the town, Linaria said to me, “Now, this place... This is the Latorita of how many years ago?”

At her urging, I looked at the time-reversing watch. I looked at the time it had been set for. When the two of us had been fighting over it, we must have pressed some buttons by mistake.

I stared at the watch in disbelief.

“...Whoa.”

Displayed on the face was an unbelievable, mind-boggling amount of time.

“...Four hundred years.”

“.....”

“.....”

We stared at each other for a moment.

“And how long is our stay?”

“.....” My mouth had become very, very heavy as I opened it to say, “Ten hours...”

That our current situation was awful went without saying.

If one year’s travel meant ten minutes of lag on our return, then a jump of four hundred years meant that, when we got home, about four thousand minutes, or sixty-seven hours, would have passed. I would have to give up on the prize for perfect attendance that I’d secretly had my eye on. I was sure that Linaria the honors student was thinking the same thing.

Timidly, I looked over at her. I was sure she must be furious.

“Four hundred years...? Did you say four hundred years ago...?”

Not only that. We were stuck in this time for the next ten hours.

I was fully convinced that Linaria was angry.

“Four hundred years ago...!”

That’s what I thought, but as soon as I looked at her face, all the remorse and the feelings of introspection that were welling up from the bottom of my heart disappeared entirely.

“.....”

Before me was a girl practically drooling with enthusiasm, eyes sparkling as she gazed at the town around her.

She wasn’t her usual self, a cool, attractive honors student, but rather a hyperexcited young girl who had just embarked on the biggest sightseeing trip of all time.

“Um, Linaria...?”

“Four hundred years ago is when this country’s library was founded...! Ah-ha! Ah-ha-ha...! I haven’t been to this time period yet, but... So this is what kind of country it was...! To think, in four hundred years’ time, it’ll be a major sightseeing destination for so many people...ahh...! I can already feel the weight of all those years!”

Speaking to herself in this way, she clung to the wall of a nearby house. The woman who lived in the house looked at her with a puzzled expression.

“So warm... So this is...a wall built four hundred years ago...”

I mean, it’s just an ordinary wall, but—

“I love it...”

Who is this person?

The image I’d had of the cool, aloof Linaria was rapidly crumbling. What we had here now was just an ordinary history enthusiast.

“Oh...? If I’m not mistaken, this is where the student dorms stand in the future...” She left me behind and flitted here and there through the town. “I see...in this era, it’s just an ordinary field... Ah...how amazing...”

I couldn’t begin to guess what was so amazing, and I didn’t particularly care to ask.

“I see...so they also sold bread at roadside stalls in this time... History really is amazing...” She stopped in front of a bread stall on a corner. But immediately thereafter, she fell to her knees. “Ah...! How can this be...?! I left my wallet in the future!”

Apparently, she had been empty-handed during our fight, so she hadn’t brought anything with her.

“Um.” Fortunately, I liked to keep a close eye on my money, so I kept my wallet in my pocket even while I was working. I had it with me now. “If you like, I could loan you some money...?”

“...!” The instant I said that, she looked up at me, eyes sparkling. “...You don’t mind?”

“Not really, as long as you pay me back after...”

When I said that, her expression instantly softened into a cherubic smile.

“Thank you!”

After that, she chuckled to herself as she bit into some bread.

I wonder if this childishness is a side effect of time travel. We did go pretty far back...

Following her lead, I had also purchased a piece of bread, but it was stale after sitting in the open for a long time. It wasn't a delicious treat so much as a cheap stomach filler.



“Really...it’s your fault we ended up in this crazy era,” Linaria said. “So what are you going to do about it? I was trying to earn my perfect attendance award, you know. How are you going to take responsibility for this?”

“Sorry, but before I answer that, can we throw away this awful bread?”

“Oh-hoh-hoh, I’m afraid not. Don’t you see? This is the flavor of history!”

“It’s nasty...”

“Anyway, we’re stuck here in the distant past for the next ten hours. What a fantastic mess.”

“I think you and I have different concerns, Linaria.”

Linaria’s mood was obviously elevated, while my spirits were dampened in contrast.

My gosh, has she always been like this?

“Well, what do you plan to do now?” Linaria asked.

There was no way I would have any plans. I shook my head meekly.

When I did, she said, “I see. Well then, let’s go to school,” and suddenly grabbed my hand.

She started walking, forcefully dragging me along behind her. On the other side of the tranquil little town stood a slightly larger building. Based on the size of the school in the present day, it was hard to imagine this tiny place could be it, and its forlorn form didn’t look like anything I would call a school.

“...What do you mean, ‘go to school’?” I tilted my head half-heartedly. We did have ten hours to kill, so I was probably going to go along with whatever she proposed anyway.

“Oh-hoh-hoh. Did you know? Latorita State University used to be nothing but a library. What you can see now is probably the library from the olden days. Over time, it will transform into the school we know. Maybe it’s possible for us to take a look inside!”

“You’re talking really fast...”

“All right, let’s go!”

She didn't seem to have any regrets about our accidental trip.

Four hundred years into the past... Visiting would cost us nearly three days in the present. Linaria was a serious girl, ever devoted to her studies. Even if she'd wanted to visit this part of history, she would have had trouble finding the time because of school.

Honestly, if she hadn't been whisked here by accident, she might never have gotten to see this era. And I never would have gotten to see her acting like a giddy schoolgirl.

Regardless of the circumstances, now it was like we shared a secret between just the two of us, and that made me feel just a little bit happy.

Maybe because she sensed me smiling, Linaria turned around. "Well, looks like you've started having fun, too, huh?"

"Nope, not me."



As it turned out, Linaria and Alte, together, seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth. I couldn't find them no matter where I searched.

Just like with the two books that had completely disappeared from the library, the two girls had just...vanished.

News that Linaria, the top honors student in school, and her friend Alte had gone missing spread quickly through the school and through town. Though it would be more accurate to say that I spread it.

"Did you see the two of them anywhere?"

Before class and during breaks, I would walk around asking students, but to no avail. All of them shook their heads just the same and answered, "I saw them in class yesterday," or, "I saw Alte working her part-time job at the bakery." All I got was information that supplemented what I knew about their movements right before they went missing.

"Miiiss..."

Apparently, the strange events going on at this school did not stop with the disappearance of the two girls. Several students had already approached me

with strange problems, saying “Look at this, please. See, the golem sand I bought earlier has disappeared!”

They had probably heard the rumor that Linaria and Alte had also had golem sand and thought maybe it had some connection to what happened to them. A number of students came to consult with me about this same thing. Any connection between the sand and the disappearances was unclear, but I nodded and said, “Thank you for the information.”

But at the end of the day, no matter how much information I got, the two of them were still missing somewhere.

And there was no one around who could solve that problem.

I was at a loss. In disappearances—and especially in kidnapping cases—the passage of time brings down the survival rate of the victims remarkably. If I didn’t hurry... If I didn’t take some kind of action, it would be too late.

“...Ah!” Sitting at my desk, worrying over what to do, it suddenly hit me.

What if I questioned the girls’ possessions?

I don’t know why it hadn’t occurred to me sooner. Kicking myself for not thinking of that earlier (despite the fact that I frequently conversed with my own possessions), I took my wand in hand and, in an empty classroom, lined up the girls’ possessions that I had recovered from the bakery.

“.....”

A wand. School supplies. A day planner. A wallet. Some kind of textbook. A detective novel. A romance novel. A historical novel. Golem sand. And...a pocket watch.

Among all the things, the watch was the one that had most likely spent the most time with Linaria.

I immediately pointed my wand at the pocket watch and cast a spell. There was no need for it to transform into a human. It would be enough just to hear its voice. I sprinkled magic over the pocket watch before me.

“Hello, Ashen Witch, Elaina.”

The watch opened its mouth immediately. Well, it didn’t have a mouth,

exactly, but you get the idea—

“Hello, Miss Pocket Watch. There’s something I’d like to ask you.”

“I am not a pocket watch,” it answered in a quiet voice. “I am known as a time-reversing watch, and I’m well aware of the problem that is vexing you. I can assure you, those two girls didn’t just disappear, and they didn’t elope together, either.”

Matter-of-factly, the watch told me the truth.

“They went back in time.”



By the time we made it to the library, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Linaria’s excitement had reached its peak.

The building itself looked completely unlike its modern incarnation. The shelves so tall you had to look up at them were not there, and neither were the wide-open areas. It looked like a completely ordinary library, with neat rows of bookshelves just tall enough to look over if you stood on tiptoe.

Even so—no, particularly because of the library’s current state—Linaria seemed even more excited. “Woow...! To think, this library will change with the passage of time into the one we know...!”

As soon as we passed through the entrance, she started wandering restlessly along every shelf, *ooing* and *ahhing*. She looked like she might even start crying.

But the former library, the one before our very eyes at the moment, did contain clear traces of its modern form. It didn’t seem like the architecture of the building had changed very much.

“.....?”

Except for one part, that is.

When I walked around the library of this time period, I saw one thing that it did not have in the present day.

In the back of the library, right in the section where the historical records room was located in modern times, there was a box.

It was about as tall as me. Its width and breadth were about equal, making it a cube. It was made of wooden planks and had been painted deep black and was sitting quietly in the back of the library.

What in the world?

I traced my hand over the surface of the box and tapped on it while taking a close look. Like me, Linaria touched the box—"Oh my, I can feel the history..."—and began rubbing her cheek on it. "I love it...", she mumbled.

So as long as it's old, any old thing will do? How shameless...

"Hey, hey, you two! Don't touch that box."

Aimed mainly at Linaria, who was intently nuzzling against the box with her cheek, a reproachful voice came flying over to us. When we turned around, there was a single librarian standing there, glaring at us.

"That's a precious object," he said. "It's not something for children like you to touch!"

Torn away from the box, Linaria looked at the mysterious thing greedily. "But I wanted to look at it a little longer..."

After that, we got distracted reading ancient books in the ancient library. There were so many books here that no longer existed in our time or that had gotten too worn out to read and were now kept away from the public.

To Linaria, it was like a mountain of treasure. She eagerly indulged herself in reading, eyes sparkling.

"....."

For her, the past was such a beautiful and precious thing. She was completely different from someone like me, who had just used the watch to increase my own personal time.

Surely, she would be much happier owning it than I would be. I had stubbornly said that I wouldn't give it back, but I felt now the time had come for me to reconsider.

"...Linaria?" I looked at the time on the time-reversing watch. We had seven hours remaining. "When we get back to the future, I'm returning this to you."

She opened her eyes a little widely, as if in surprise, then opened her mouth and replied, "...I see. I'm happy that you understand."

"But could I still travel back in time with you on occasion?" I explained myself further. "I also want to immerse myself in unusual spaces like this. I'm happy to accompany you whenever you travel to the past, so won't you take me with you sometimes when you visit?"

"Goodness. You only stumbled upon the time-reversing watch by chance, and yet you think you can make demands?"

Linaria answered my question with a question.

"So...is that a no?"

I answered her with another question.

For a moment or two, she acted like she was thinking it over. Then, after an awkward silence, she said, "If it's only occasionally, well, I guess that would be all right. You already know the secret of the time-reversing watch anyway."

Giving this excuse, she turned away sharply.

Never mind the time-reversing watch. Don't you realize I've gotten my hands on a much juicier secret? Not that I care, though.

She and I were as different as different could be. We might as well have lived in different worlds. But by sharing this secret, miraculously, I felt like we had gotten just a little bit closer. And I had discovered that this unapproachable girl was really a simple student, just like me.

And then.

Just when I was getting comfortable with the silence.

The library doors were suddenly flung open.

Standing imposingly on the other side of the doors was a witch.

Her orange hair was tied up in a single ponytail on the side of her head, and after loudly clearing her throat, she introduced herself.

"Hello. I am the witch Natasha."

“...So you’re saying that the two of them were fighting over Alte’s time-reversing watch when they accidentally went back in time, is that right?”

“It is as you say. And the fact that they haven’t returned yet means they went quite a distance. No, quite a ways back in time. Several hundred years or so.” The pocket watch formerly known as a time-reversing watch told me all this with an indifferent manner. “Therefore, if you wait for them, I’m sure they will come back soon. It’s nothing to get worked up about.”

This series of explanations straight from the watch itself was utterly astounding. Being able to easily rewind time just by pressing a button—this and other aspects of the tale were pretty difficult to believe, despite hearing them directly from the magic watch.

“.....”

However, even supposing that, as the time-reversing watch had said, the two girls had traveled back in time, what on earth could we do about it?

If the two of them had gone back in time, if they no longer existed in the present day, then I had no other options.

Moreover...

“How am I supposed to explain this to the people who are searching for them...?”

If I told everyone that the girls had fiddled around with a watch and gone off on a journey through time, do you really think anyone would have believed me?

For the time being, I felt that my most urgent business was figuring out how to explain what was going on. However, that was not the only problem.

“...Huh?”

I suddenly realized that, sitting among Linaria’s wallet, school supplies, textbooks, and other items that were lined up on the table—the lid of the small vial that contained the golem sand was open.

The sand that should have been inside the vial had disappeared into thin air. The inside of the vial was completely and totally empty. I had no recollection of opening it or even taking it out of her bag.

“The golem sand I bought earlier has disappeared!”

I remembered the words that one student had said to me.

Then suddenly, from behind my back came a sound like something dry and rough rustling around.

I turned around, and then I saw it.

Wriggling on the ground, looking for all the world like a being with a purpose, then escaping from the classroom into the hallway, was a figure made of sand.



“Ah, greetings, Lady Natasha, Witch of the Seal!”

The librarian who had pulled us away from the big black box earlier welcomed the woman with both arms wide open.

The witch Natasha.

I recognized the name, of course. There was a legend in a distant land which stated that she was a mighty witch who had defeated a dragon long, long ago.

I was quite concerned about why a woman like that was in a place like this.

“What? Whaaat...?” But if I had to choose, I was more concerned about the way Linaria was shaking. “Wh-wh-what do I do?! It’s Natasha! The real Natasha!”

“Aren’t you overreacting?”

Sure, she was the celebrity to end all celebrities, but so what?

“I see. So this is it. You need me to seal this away under the library floor real quick, right?” Passing by me and Linaria, the great witch Natasha, or whoever, stared at the black box. “Hmm... Where did you get your hands on this?”

She turned to look at the librarian.

“Oh, one of the townsfolk found it in the forest. Apparently, the magical energy of the forest had some effect on the sand... I’m sure you’ll understand if you take a look inside the box, but this sand is now giving off magical energy.”

“Are you saying it has the same kind of energy as the trees in the forest?”

The librarian nodded at Natasha.

Since magical energy is mainly generated deep inside forests, it's said that mages are able to fire off more powerful spells than usual in places with a lot of greenery. That's what they taught me in school anyway.

In short, the librarian must have meant that the sand stored in the black box was able to fulfill the same role as the forest flora.

"Lady Natasha, we'd like for you to let us use this sand as a power source for the library," said the librarian. "For example, we could devise a way to make library books return here automatically or give off warning spells if a theft occurs. Can you do that?"

"...Well, it's not exactly impossible." Natasha readily lifted the lid of the black box. "But the amount is a bit of a problem..."

"There's not enough?"

"There's too much. If it accumulates even a little bit more energy, the sand will start moving on its own. It'll be impossible to contain it. It could be disastrous."

"Ha-ha-ha. Not to worry. I gathered up every last bit of sand from the forest, and there wasn't any more than this. There's nothing to cause a disaster."

"...That's fine, if true..."

"So please, without delay, will you seal this under the library?"

Natasha waved her wand. "Sure, sure."

"So this is how the school got all of its mysterious magical equipment... I see, how enlightening, mm-hmm." Just then, a student very rudely wormed her way into the conversation. Her timing was awful.

Obviously, it was me.

"...And this would be?" Natasha looked back and forth between me and the librarian.

"I'm Alte! Hi there. This is my friend Linaria." I tugged at Linaria's sleeve.

"Wait...what are you doing?! Stop it!"

Oh-hoh-hoh, what are you talking about?

“Linaria, this is your chance! Go get her autograph, would you?”

“Huh? Autograph...? Of all the presumptuous...”

“Why are you hesitating? We went to all the trouble of traveling to the past, so don’t you want just one souvenir?”

“.....” Linaria was obviously starstruck. She kept glancing intensely at Natasha and then quickly averting her eyes. “I—I can’t... No way... An autograph would be...”

...Maybe it’s her first time?

Unlike Linaria, I didn’t have any particular admiration for the great witch or whoever she was, though I think my flat reaction only provoked her.

“A fan of mine, are you? My goodness, I’m blushing!” Natasha frowned. “I really don’t remember doing anything to boast of, though.”

“That’s not true!” It was Linaria who flatly shut that down. “I’ve read many, many books in my life, but I know of no witch who has left behind such amazing achievements as you.”

After that, Linaria went on and on, endlessly explaining what made Natasha such an amazing witch. It seemed like a torturous ordeal, but Natasha never gave any indication of hating it and just smiled bashfully from start to finish. “My goodness!”

In the end, we both got our autographs. Apparently, since she had eradicated the dragon, she was used to fans approaching her, and when she signed her name, she swished the pen across the paper with an extremely practiced hand.

“Now, then.” Natasha put the pen away. “You two, please give me some space. I’ve got work to do.”

Then she cast a spell.

The lid of the big, black, wooden box levitated gently in the air, and sand poured out of it like water, spilling onto the floor. The grains lingered on the surface briefly then disappeared into the floor.

“All right, all done.”

The whole thing happened very quickly. I was sure I had been told that this sand was precious stuff that gave off magical energy, but it was treated rather carelessly and ended up getting absorbed into the library floor.

What on earth just happened?

Noticing my puzzled expression, Natasha answered my unspoken question. “Just now, you see, I sealed the sand away into the floor of the library. For many years to come, this library will be a fountain of magical energy. It will be possible to use that energy to cast spells on the books to make them return automatically, and all other sorts of contrivances.”

I see, I see.

In the present-day library, there was a mechanism that made any restricted books that were removed from it return on their own within one day. This, too, must have been supplied by the magical energy spilling from the sand sealed beneath the library. And the perpetually burning incinerator behind the school was probably the same.

“This is very important, so I’ll say it once more.” Natasha turned to look at the librarian and continued, “You must never, under any circumstances, add any sand, even if you want more power. The amount that we just put in is the maximum amount that can be used safely. If you add even the smallest amount afterward, it will be disastrous.”

“.....”

“.....”

Linaria and I looked at each other.

Sand.

I had brought sand from the past to the future.

.....

I suddenly had a bad feeling.



Sand had come to life all over campus. It was the sand that had escaped from

me and the sand that had slipped away from the students.

And there was a lot of it. The thought of the sheer quantity of sand making the rounds at school was enough to make my head spin.

Bit by bit, I froze the grains of sand in ice, but unfortunately, I had only two hands.

“There’s no end to it!”

My efforts wouldn’t be nearly enough.

The sand that was lucky enough to escape from my ice attacks slithered around on the floor and disappeared off somewhere.

I chased it through the school, freezing clumps of sand in ice everywhere I went. Some sand attacked me, while other sand ran away. And there was some that behaved like normal sand and just sat there.

Every grain of sand seemed to have its own temperament, yet it was all obeying some singular purpose.

Running around the school, I eventually arrived at the library. One of the sand snakes had taken refuge inside.

“...And this place only just reopened...”

I wondered what we would do if the books got damaged because this strange sand slipped in.

With an exasperated sigh, I opened the doors to the library.

And then...

“.....Huh?”

...I saw it.

An enormous quantity of sand. As if with purpose, it pulsed and swelled above the floor. When it noticed me, it turned and fled with quick, agile movements, like a mouse startled by the shadow of a human.

Into the floor.

“.....Huh?”

The library floor heaved slightly. I felt a quick tremor underfoot, as if something was striking the floor from below or as if the floor itself was throbbing. Again and again, a noise echoed from underground. The whole library shook, and a deep fissure opened in the floor.

Once the initial crack was carved into the floor, the rest happened quickly. The floor of the library swelled upward with a *crunch*, sending bookshelves toppling in an avalanche of paper.

Finally, the floor split open completely.

And.

A monster with a body like a pile of boulders crawled up out of the floor.

“.....Huuuh?”

A golem had materialized.



CHAPTER 9

Many Years' Journey: Blooming Memories

By the time we returned from the past, the Commonwealth of Latorita was already in shambles. Buildings had fallen, roofs had collapsed, and our school was absolutely devastated. It was bad enough that for a moment, we wondered if we'd actually made it back to our time and hadn't flown off course into some kind of parallel dimension.

What on earth happened here?

"....."

It didn't take long to figure out what had caused all this destruction. There, in front of the library, several teachers were furiously firing spells at a huge monster made of many tiny particles.

It was a golem.

"Oh, you two! So you're finally back? You traveled quite far, didn't you?"

There was someone sitting inside the ruins of a nearby school building and looking up at us.

"...Miss?" I called.

She must have been fighting the golem the whole time we were gone. Her robe was tattered and torn. She didn't appear to be injured, but she sounded quite exhausted when she let out a big sigh and hung her head.

"Um...Miss, what...happened?"

At my words, the teacher frowned. "Oh, you wanna hear what happened while you were gone?"

Her gaze fell on the time-reversing watch.

Apparently, she had somehow figured out the reason why we had gone missing for a few days. That's how it appeared, anyway.

"....."

Linaria and I kept silent, and the teacher let out another huge sigh. “All right, fine,” she said. “Let me give you the quick version.”

Then she told us about the disaster that occurred in our absence. A disaster of my own making.



The sand assembled itself into a roughly human-shaped monster. Its arms, legs, head, and everything else were all made of sand. After smashing its way through the library floor, it turned and slowly walked toward me.

It was about twice my height. Not colossal, but definitely not small, either. There was something powerfully frightening about it. I could tell at a glance that it was dangerous.

I didn’t have time to think. I immediately rained spells down on it, trying to break the golem back up into sand.

But...

“.....”

It was useless. The golem immediately absorbed all of my spells—it consumed them. Whether I showered it with flames or tried to freeze it in ice, all of my spells got absorbed into the golem’s body.

I could tell right away that anything I tried would probably be useless. No matter what kind of spells I cast on it, they would just end up getting absorbed.

When the golem finally reached me...

“.....!”

...it swung its sandy arm down with a *thud*, smashing it to bits on the library floor. Its body was large and slow, so it was easy to avoid, but I wouldn’t stand a chance if it landed a direct hit.

In order to save the library from further destruction, I led the golem outside. Happily, it didn’t show any interest in anything besides me, so when I retreated, it chased after me right away.

But leaving the library was also problematic.

“M-Miss! What is that monster?!”

Teachers and students alike had come running when they heard the thunderous roars from the library and were now gawking at the golem before their eyes.

They were all brilliant mages, but they had never encountered such a monster. Their response was to cast spells at it.

“I’ll exterminate it! You stand back!”

Of course, just as when I had tried, the spells evaporated the moment they touched the golem.

“.....”

Then came our biggest error of all.

The students and teachers who had been giving it their all and continuously hitting the monster with spells paused for a moment to see if their attacks were having any effect, and in the space of that momentary reprieve, the golem again swung its massive fist down on the ground.

The earth’s surface crumbled. Together with smashed bits of earth, ice swirled and scattered around the golem. The pillars of ice that flew through the air like spears were attacking the mages.

The golem had gained the ability to use spells.

It had obviously been gaining strength from the very moment it broke through the library floor.

“.....”

That’s when I realized something. The only time the golem paused, even for a moment, was when it was being bombarded with spells.

And the more magical energy we rained down upon it, the more its power would increase and drive it into a frenzy.

“Everyone! Don’t let up on your attacks, even for a second! Keep on hitting it with spells nonstop!”

After that, we did the best we could to continuously shower the golem with magic. There were a few times we had to stop to avoid its attacks, but we never

gave up.

Of course, this was only a stopgap. We probably wouldn't be able to land a decisive blow to take the golem down. But this was the best we could manage. The only thing we could do to keep the damage from spreading was to keep it temporarily immobile.

Even though I knew it would become stronger and harder to deal with the more we attacked, we didn't have any alternatives.

So we continued launching spells at the golem. The students and teachers around me were doing their best, blasting off ice attacks, but everything was being endlessly absorbed, and no matter how many spells we fed the thing, there was no end in sight.

At this point, if we stopped attacking for even a single moment, it would mean certain doom.

"...So you're saying that we can't defeat the golem...?"

Alte was looking at me with a frown.

That's not the case at all.

"We can't defeat it here. But there is another way," I said. "I actually defeated that golem once before."

It was a very long time ago, so I hadn't recognized it right away, but the longer I looked at it, the more certain I was that it was the golem I had faced before.

So in short, I knew how to take it down.

"You defeated it...? When was this?" Linaria seemed very skeptical.

I answered her clearly and concisely. "Seven years ago."



Our teacher held an empty little vial up for us to see. "All right," she said, "I hope you two are ready for a little extracurricular instruction."

Then she scooped some sand up from the ground and put it in the vial.

What are we doing playing in the sand at a time like this...?

I was puzzled, but she didn't pay me any mind and continued playing. "I'm

filling this vial up completely with sand, all right? Like this.”

“...And what of it?” Linaria tilted her head.

The teacher looked up at her with a smug expression.

“Think of this as if it’s the golem. The golem is an aggregation of sand infused with magical energy. The annoying thing about it is that when the sand grains coalesce, they have the power to absorb the energy of our spells. No matter how much we attack, all the magic gets absorbed. Like this.”

The teacher waved her wand over the vial and showered it with water. The sand sealed in the vial sucked up the water and grew heavier.

“The more magical energy it receives, the stronger the golem becomes. If we continue supplying it with magical energy, it will eventually grow beyond our control.”

There seemed to be a slight contradiction between what she was saying and the fact that even now, the other mages were still continuing to bombard the monster with spells.

The teacher said, “By the way, do you know what happens to sand structures when you keep pouring water on them?” On and on, she poured water into the vial.

There was no need for us to answer. The answer came to us.

Muddy water overflowed from the vial.

In other words...

“They disintegrate. If we keep on applying magical energy, the golem won’t be able to maintain its form. That’s what happens. That’s why we keep raining spells on the golem. Of course, while it’s under attack, it can’t move, so that’s also a consideration.”

*Oh-hoh! I see. So that means we can easily take down the golem, right?
Hooray!*

But our teacher frowned.

“But right now, there just aren’t enough mages, you see... We can manage for

now, but it's only a matter of time before everyone is exhausted. And even with your help, I don't think we have enough power to make the golem disintegrate."

"I see." I nodded.

"Oh no." Linaria put her index finger to her chin.

"In other words, to defeat that golem, we need the help of many more mages. But as you can see, there are hardly any witches left in fighting condition. And I'm just about out of magical energy myself. Right now, you two are probably the only people here who can call on your full magical powers."

Long ago...when this institution was still divided into the mundane and the magical courses, it had been home to many powerful mages.

With our current collective powers, we were no match for the golem.

That's what the teacher told us.

"If you can take the golem with you back in time, you could douse it with even more magical energy... Well? Linaria? Alte?" It was obvious that she already knew all about the time-reversing watch. "...You both know what I'm trying to say, don't you?"

And those words told us that we had no right to turn her down.

"....."

"....."

Linaria and I looked at each other.

There was nothing to do but use the time-reversing watch to solve the disaster that the time-reversing watch had caused.



Alas, the two of them had no choice but to return to the past. Somehow, I had persuaded them to make the journey again.

Although, since we still had a little time to spare, I did as I had done in the library before and gave them ten minutes to get ready. I figured they would need it, considering the task ahead.

“Understood! All right, I’m off to write my last will and testament!” Alte bowed once to me, then ran off. “I might not make it back in ten minutes, so if that happens, you go on without me, Linaria!” she added worryingly.

Don’t tell me you’re thinking of running away?

“.....”

While Alte ran off in a hurry, Linaria wore her usual flat expression.

It seemed like she was planning to waste the full ten minutes right here.

She fixed her gaze on the golem, which was still being bombarded with every spell we could throw at it. The monster was frozen in place, trembling slightly. She was just staring at it with emotionless eyes.

“Teacher?” Her eyes still on the golem, Linaria asked, “How much do you know?”

How much do I know?

“I know just about everything. I know that you have a time-reversing watch. I know that you were able to maintain your good grades because you kept going back in time to do extra work.”

“.....”

“I’m warning you out of concern—it’s best if this is the last time you use that thing.”

Traveling through time—separating yourself from your native era—rarely resulted in anything good. Going back to try to correct past mistakes or to serve some selfish goal—these actions ultimately only became chains tying you to the past. You’d never be able to take even a single step into the future. You’d waste all the time you had been given without even realizing it, and eventually, you’d lose your ability to connect to the present.

“I’m worried,” Linaria said, though she certainly didn’t show it.

“Let me tell you a story from when I was young,” she continued. “On my birthday, my father and mother gave me a watch. They had happened upon it in an antique shop during their travels. It didn’t take me long to discover that the watch had a hidden power.”

“.....”

“I was absolutely thrilled by my new ability. Again and again, I used the watch to travel into the past. It was amazing...addictive, even.”

“I guess it would be.”

The power to visit the past, even once, is something most people can only dream of. I'm not surprised she grew obsessed with it.

“I was the same as her,” Linaria said. “Just like Alte, I tried to win friends by bringing gifts back from the past. And when I was still very young, when I had a fight with a friend over something trivial, I even took that friend with me back in time... I showed them the scene of what had happened in the past, just to prove that I was right.”

“...What happened to those friends?”

She looked at me.

“They stopped being my friends. They left me. When you have the power to go back in time, no matter what you do, other people think you're weird. I kept going back, over and over again, and eventually, people started avoiding me.”

“.....”

“By the time I was totally isolated, I had forgotten how to interact with people.” She smiled. “Even so, I remained a prisoner to the watch. I couldn't let it go. I thought that if I mastered its power, I could be the greatest mage in the world. Then other people would *have* to like me.”

Looking at her now, it was obvious just how misguided her hypothesis had been. She was still hopelessly lonely. But even after that had become clear, she still hadn't been able to bring herself to give up the watch. Fearing isolation, she had continued relying on its power, which only made her more isolated. She had gotten her priorities backward.

“So are you still trying to decide whether to give it up?”

“...I am not.” She shook her head. “I want to give it up. But...well...” She began to squirm.

“.....?”

Frowning suspiciously, I waited for her to speak.

Finally, she answered me, mumbling evasively like she had something stuck in her molars. “I feel like, thanks to this watch, I’ve met someone who I...might become friends with, maybe, so...um...”

Ah, that’s what you meant when you said you’re worried.

“And that’s what you really want? To enjoy visiting the past together? With a friend?”

“.....”



She nodded wordlessly.

I let out a sigh.

“Acquaintanceships rarely blossom into friendships on their own, you know.”

“You sound awfully sure about that...”

“That’s my advice. Take it from someone who’s been around longer than you have.”

I don’t care whether she takes it to heart or lets it pass in one ear and out the other.

Though I did hope she would come to understand my meaning in due time. Whether it was today, tomorrow, or sometime in the distant future, I wanted her to understand that there was nothing she needed to rewind time for.

“I couldn’t write my will in ten minutes!”

Alte came running back just as Linaria and I had settled into silence. We both watched the girl wave her hands as she rushed over to us.

“Well then, I guess you should try not to die on the other side!”

Or maybe I should say this isn’t the sort of situation in which you need to prepare for death...

I said, “If you’re ready, then let’s go!”

We positioned ourselves behind the golem, which was still being bombarded with spells, and I quickly told the two girls, “When you arrive in the past, you have to sweep up the golem. There’s no need to go out of your way to explain the situation to the mages of the past. I’m certain that the mages on campus will come to your aid on their own when they see the golem going on a rampage—probably, myself included.”

However...

“Just to repeat myself, be careful, okay? You must absolutely not tell anyone that you have come from the future. Not others, and not me.” I took a deep breath. “I don’t want to know the future.”



Linaria and I held hands and stared at the golem.

It was as motionless as ever, still being showered with spells. If they stopped for even a second, there would be no escaping the catastrophe.

In order to safely send the monster back to the past, there was no other way but for us to weave through the constant barrage of magic and get close enough to touch it.

“...Are you ready, Linaria?” I asked, gripping the time-reversing watch tightly.

“Are you?” Linaria also grabbed hold of it.

The watch was warm from two people’s body heat.

I looked beside me and saw Linaria wearing her usual calm expression. Even at a time like this, she didn’t look nervous at all.

“...Let’s go.” It was a slight relief to see her like that.

The two of us, both gripping the watch, ran into the deluge of magic, reaching for the golem at the center of the dazzling display.

And then we were transported to seven years in the past.

“Are you listening? Once you get the golem back to the past, you need to get far away from it. You absolutely have to put some distance between it and yourself. If the golem hits you with all the power it’s absorbed, it could very well kill you.”

Recalling our teacher’s words, the moment we arrived on the campus of the past, I leaped onto my broom and flew straight up into the air.

Our teacher had devised a plan to seal the golem away seven years in the past, and Linaria and I each had our roles to play.

Once I had gone up about as high as the tallest buildings in the city, I stopped in midair and turned to look back down.

I could see that the entrance to the school library was entirely encased in ice.

“The golem will probably head for the library first, so freeze the door and seal it up.”

Those had been our teacher’s instructions, and just as I had, Linaria had

sprung into action the moment we arrived, freezing over the library entrance with magic ice. Since the golem was made out of the sand that had been inside the library, it would obviously try to get to that sand once it arrived in the past.

“Once it realizes that it can’t get into the library, next, the golem should try to seek out the nearest source of magical energy. So you need to concentrate a ball of magical energy onto the tip of your wand and lead it away.”

“Lead it where?” Linaria had asked.

“Into town,” our teacher had answered.

To be precise, to the outskirts of town.

If we didn’t get it far enough away from campus, there was no telling when the golem might break into the library. For that reason, I bore the responsibility of leading the golem away all by myself. While I did, the other party to this plan—the one who had sealed the library with ice—would secure the cooperation of the other students and teachers.

And then we would all meet on the outskirts of town and strike at the golem.

That was the plan, anyway.

After she had finished explaining everything about the plan for the past, our teacher had said, *“Leading the golem—it goes without saying that this role is extremely dangerous. You two should have a serious conversation about which of you will do it. You’ll be using your own life as a lure, so...”*

So I had decided to accept the duty.

“Graaaaaaaaahhh!”

Floating a ball of magical energy on the tip of my wand, I urged my broom forward with all my strength. The light at the end of my wand wavered and swayed, and the golem made the ground rumble as it ran after me. All according to plan. It was following the bait—namely, me.

The golem leaped into the sky, the force of its movements sending cracks through the ground beneath its feet, and for a moment, it was right behind me in the air. But it just as quickly fell back down into the center of town.

Even if it could jump, it couldn’t actually fly.

The golem landed, destroying a chunk of the town's main avenue in the process. Then, just as soon as it had touched down, it came flying up at me again. Over and over, it leaped into the air, trying to reach the end of my wand and shattering the ground with each landing.

On and on, we continued single-mindedly down the main road.

We couldn't help but draw attention. Screams were rising from everywhere I could see below me. This was obviously a major catastrophe.

However, this was the only route I could travel.

"When you're riding on your broom and leading the golem, you must follow the main avenue as you go. If you stick to where the road is broad, it'll be much less likely to step on anybody. If it tramples on any homes or anything, there could be serious casualties."

I was following my teacher's instructions.

"...Ummm, I'm so sorry..."

But of course, the main avenue was the main avenue, and there was a lot of pedestrian traffic. I couldn't help but feel guilty about all the people's lives that were being destroyed down there.

Fortunately, I already knew that this incident was not supposed to result in any deaths, since nobody had died seven years ago. But still, I felt bad about all the damage being caused on our way to the edge of town.

At least, that's what I thought.

"....."

But...

Just at that moment...

Directly behind me...

The golem grazed the brush end of my broom again, then plummeted back to the ground again.

I was focused on something in its path—a lone mage, sitting on a bench right where the golem was going to fall, loitering there absentmindedly.

A witch with ashen hair.

I had to look again, and yes, there she was. The woman who had always looked after me so closely, seven years in the past.



There was a lone witch loitering absentmindedly on a bench in the Commonwealth of Latorita.

Her hair was ash. Her eyes were lapis. She sat there in a daze, her bread and coffee beside her, with a map of the surrounding area spread across her lap.

She was a witch, and a traveler.

She had stayed more than long enough in this country, so she was trying to decide where she should go next.

“.....”

As she stared at the map, she nodded knowingly and munched on bread.

This woman, who was just continuing along on her travels as always, who on earth could she be?

That’s right, she’s—

“Excuse me!”

My leisure time was rudely interrupted when suddenly, a girl came barreling toward me on a broom. With a frantic look on her face, she shouted and plowed right into me, and we tumbled to the ground together.

“Uuugh...!” The girl groaned, facedown on the street.

“What are you doing all of a sudden...?”

The piece of bread I had been enjoying was now, woefully, lying in the dirt. I pondered this terrible tragedy as I clambered to my feet.

The very next moment, an enormous foot descended from above and trampled the bench I was seated on into smithereens, along with the map and coffee I’d left there. With a *crunch*, a fragment of the bench landed right in front of me.

Looking up, I saw a massive creature. Its body was made out of some strange

substance, but I could still tell that it was looking down at me.

“.....”

That was when I realized that the girl who had swooped in from the side had apparently been trying to save me.

“Um...what is that monster?”

I looked at the girl beside me, who was whining to herself. “Um...that really hurt...” Her clothes told me that she was a student at the university here.

When she noticed me staring, the girl started rambling nonsensically. “Oh, Miss, um, this golem, it’s from seven years in the future...”

I cocked my head.

“...‘Miss’? ‘Seven years in the future’?”

I had been pretending to be a student here until just the other day, so I would understand if she mistook me for a student, but... What’s all this about “seven years in the future”?

I already had several questions concerning whatever was going on.

“Waaahhh...!” Without explaining the situation any further, the girl started to panic. “P-please don’t ask! I’ve been forbidden to speak about it by my teacher!” She covered her mouth with her hand.

Even that only raised more questions.

But it didn’t seem like I had the time to sit and think about the situation.

“.....!”

I took out my broom and, just as she had done to me earlier, flew straight at her, plowing into this girl whose name I didn’t even know.

It wasn’t out of spite. I wasn’t trying to get revenge.

As I pushed her aside, I turned to look back just as the sand-colored monster’s fist slammed into the ground. My bread, which had fallen in that vicinity, was pulverized along with the red bricks that covered the main avenue.

Let me repeat myself so that you understand the significance of what had just

happened. My bread was ruined. My delicious, delectable bread, which I had specially ordered from a fancy bakery with an attached café, was gone.

“.....”

Maybe I didn’t entirely understand what was going on...

And maybe this whole situation had literally fallen on my head...

But there was one thing I knew with absolute clarity.

“That thing is my enemy.”



Ashen hair and lapis eyes. She was the right height and sounded the same. Without a doubt, the person I found there was my teacher, seven years in the past. There was no way it could have been anyone else.

However...

“.....”

The woman who had, without a word, begun to wave her wand and stayed silent as she rained spells of all kinds down on the golem—the woman with me now—was wearing an expression I had never seen on her before.

She looked furious.

“.....” With eyes cold enough to send a chill down your spine, she glanced over at me. “What’s with this monster? It doesn’t move at all, no matter how many spells I hit it with.”

“Ummm...” I didn’t know how to answer.

I had been sworn to secrecy by my teacher in the future.

I had already let a little information slip out because I had gotten flustered, but certainly I shouldn’t say any more. If I gave in now, I would be breaking my promise.

So I would stick to my principles and maintain my silence—

“If you insist on staying silent, I’ll turn this wand on you.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll talk!”

I immediately folded.

After reminding my teacher to continue her barrage of spells, I explained what was going on. I told her that the monster was called a golem and that it was absorbing the magical energy of her spells, but also that she had to keep hitting it with magic, because that was the only way to defeat it. I even told her that I had come from the future to defeat the golem.

I told her all this while concealing the fact that she was my trusted teacher.

If I really, really thought about it, my teacher in the future had instructed me not to talk about it, but it didn't seem like there would be any real problem with divulging that information.

When it came to the golem, I had only told her information that would soon become clear anyway as she fought against it, so she would have known sooner or later even if I didn't reveal anything.

Regarding the fact that I had come from the future, I figured there was no way she would believe me anyway, even if I told her the truth. I mean, who would honestly believe that I had been sent back in time to defeat a monster...?

"I see. So that's what happened."

...This lady, that's who.

"...You believe me...?" I stared dumbfounded at my teacher. "You don't think that sounds absolutely crazy...?"

She shook her head. "I've got experience with traveling back in time, so I don't really doubt you. *Besides...*," she continued, "...I can tell, just by looking at your face, that you're a terrible liar."

"....."

"Honestly, your teacher or whomever probably knew you'd spill the truth even as she was making you swear to secrecy. She doesn't sound like a very nice person to me."

But my "teacher or whomever" is your future self...

After she finished listening to my explanation, my teacher from the past looked at me and said, "Well, I think I more or less understand the situation. For

now, I'll take charge here. Can you lead the evacuation of the city residents?"

Of course, she never stopped raining spells down on the golem, even as she calmly took charge.

"B-but..." I couldn't just obediently nod and say, *"All right, leave it to me!"* "But if I don't move the golem to the outskirts of the city—"

"I'll handle that."

My teacher from the past cut me off decisively.

Then, looking up into the distant sky, she said, "Leave the rest to *your teacher.*"

Then, from the other side of the street came flames, and arrows, and iron, and thunder, and ice...

The air crackled with the sheer might of the magical onslaught.



The witches who had come running were all university teachers.

They seemed to already know the golem's special traits. They rained spells down on it endlessly, rooting it in place.

The teachers' attacks were so overwhelming, and the fight was so one-sided, it seemed like I wouldn't even have to assist them.

"So you haven't left the country yet, I see."

A woman brought her broom straight down beside me.

It was Vivian.

The woman with long green hair pushed her glasses up with a finger and told me, "As you can see, we're a bit shorthanded. If you've got time, I'd like you to help us."

"Even *I* couldn't turn a blind eye to something like this, you know."

Besides, I have a personal grudge against this golem. It ruined my special limited-availability bread. I'm going to teach it firsthand just how frightening food-based grudges can be.

“.....”

Although reinforcements had arrived, the golem was still going strong. It was clear that if we didn't come up with a new strategy, everyone would eventually run out of magic. And when that happened, the whole city would be destroyed.

It was going to be important to get everyone away from the main avenue as fast as possible.

“You, what are you doing? Quickly, go evacuate the citizens.” I threw a glance to the side and added, “I thought I told you, we'll handle things here.”

“...But—”

The student who had come from the future, whose name I didn't know, was just standing there in the middle of the street, wearing an indecisive expression.

She probably felt on some level like it was her personal duty to bear the dangerous role of leading the golem away. That's how it looked.

Vivian grinned at the girl, who was still just standing there, stock-still. “I heard everything about the situation from your friend. Please relax. We'll deal with this golem.”

The tension and drive that had characterized her expression until just a few days earlier were completely gone. Now she was simply a teacher looking out for a pupil.

Vivian said, “We teachers have our duties, and students have theirs. Hurry up, get going.”

Then she pointed her wand to the other side of the city, indicating the road that she and the others had just come down. Since the battle was unfolding in the very center of this wide avenue and cutting off the path of retreat, the residents who had been late to flee were still there. And there were students looking this way, gripping their wands, ready to protect the residents.

At last, the girl from the future looked back and forth between us and the students, then said, “...Sorry! And thank you!”

Finally, she ran off and left us to it.

With her departure, we were able to get ready to really bring down the

golem. While there were students still around, they might have gotten caught up in the fight.

By the way...

“So do you still think that teaching magic to students who aren’t mages is part of a teacher’s duties?”

“Of course it’s not. Don’t be silly.”

“.....”

If I were to go back in time, I would have liked to show past Vivian how she was acting today.

I gripped my wand and got on my broom.

“Could I get you to lead this monster to the outskirts of town now?” I asked. Apparently, that had been the duty of the girl who had brought it here from the future.

In that case, I’ll let the teachers like Vivian handle it.

“What are you going to do?” Vivian asked as she took a seat on her own broom.

I readied my wand. “I’m going to get things ready so that we can take it out in a single blow.”

And then I began gathering all of my magical energy into the tip of my wand, fueled by my hatred of the thing for ruining my bread.



Immediately after I ran off, the teachers started leading the golem away.

The deluge of spells pelting the golem suddenly ceased, and as soon as that happened, the monster split the ground as it leaped into the air.

Up in the sky, I could see many teachers holding balls of magic on the tips of their wands, as I had been doing until just a few minutes ago. They proceeded toward the outskirts of town, leading the golem away.

The glow from their magic quickly faded into the distance as the whole city shook with the *thud, thud* of the monster’s movements.

Once the golem was out of sight, I helped with the rescue operations.

“Are you all right? Can you stand?” Wherever there were injured people, I offered medical treatment and moved them somewhere safe.

“Grrraaah!” Wherever there was rubble, I cleared it away with magic.

“Everyone, please stay calm and keep moving forward slowly!” I guided the evacuation.

I did everything I could to help.

However, the golem’s sudden appearance had sent the city into a panic, and only a few people actually cooperated with our evacuation. The only sounds that made it to my ears were people’s shouting voices and the sound of their feet as they ran around trying to escape.

“Wait! Hey! Calm down! Please, calm down!”

I was flustered as I tried to lead the way, but everyone was running away in a panic.

I was at a loss for what to do as I gazed after the fleeing people.

I couldn’t tell whether the *thud, thud* sound that was reverberating came from the golem or from the feet of the fleeing city residents.

As I was watching the people fleeing the city, as well as the students guiding them, I looked for her—for Linaria.

I wondered where she could be. As I continued helping with the evacuation, I scanned the crowd for her figure.

And then, something made me look away.

There was a loud *snap* and the sound of something crumbling to pieces. I turned to see that one of the tall buildings lining the main avenue had started to collapse.

The golem must have damaged the structure when it came through. Or maybe one of the teachers had struck it with a stray spell. But I didn’t have time to ponder the exact reason, because there was a girl right in the path of the falling rubble.

She must have tripped. With her hands and knees on the ground, wearing a dumbfounded expression, she was looking up at the oncoming avalanche.

She had chestnut-colored hair.

She was young, maybe about eight years old.

Her face was very familiar.

In fact, the whole scene was all too familiar.

Without thinking, I pointed my wand at the rubble, ready to rescue the child.

I was going to split it in two. I was going to save the girl.

But...

“—Watch out!”

I didn't make it to her, because before I could, another student used a spell to blast the falling rubble to pieces.

Crack!

“...Are you hurt?”

Linaria smiled at the girl.



After leading the golem on and on, we finally reached the outskirts of town.

In this place with no pedestrian traffic and no buildings to speak of, where the weather-beaten ground just stretched out before us, the witches confronted the golem.

They began bombarding it again with spell after spell.

However...

They couldn't take it down. The golem absorbed every bit of magical energy they threw at it. Not only were the spells not effective, the golem looked quite unruffled as it shrugged off all attacks.

“What in the world is going on here...?!”

Unable to hide her frustration, one of the teachers cursed bitterly.

Someone answered her, “Keep hitting it with magic! I’m sure it’ll crumble sooner or later!”

But someone else let out a sigh. “It’s never going to end like this, no matter how long we keep at it! Our energy is just going to be absorbed!”

Though they were able to hold the golem in place, none of their spells had any real effect on the thing.

Gradually, anxiety began to set in among the teachers.

“.....” Vivian, the teacher with long, green hair, was the same.

She must have wondered, if they kept going like this, wouldn’t they run out of magical energy? And wouldn’t the monster recover then? Wouldn’t the monster make a comeback? Her anxiety seemed to grow as she steadily kept up the magical bombardment.

“Are you ready yet?” she demanded nervously. “You’re really keeping us in suspense.”

“Please don’t put that on me,” I answered, continuing to gather magical energy at the tip of my wand. “I’m still going to try to take it down in one shot, so just hold out a little longer.”

“I have to wonder where on earth that confidence is coming from...”

“It’s coming from the tip of my wand...”

“.....”

“.....”

“Not yet?”

“Just a little longer.”

The light hovering at the tip of my wand was beginning to shine with dazzling brilliance. It was radiant and bright enough to color everything around it white.

This light, a manifestation of most of the magical energy in my body, finally lost its heat and began to take on a chill.

As it grew colder, my breaths came out white.

“Still not yet?” Vivian looked at me sidelong.

“All finished,” I answered.

Then I waved my wand.

The freezing ball of magical energy was released from my wand, bobbed unsteadily through the air like a soap bubble, brushed past the golem, and started rising into the air.

“.....” Vivian paused to watch the bubble ascend, frowning. “...Doesn’t look like much of a secret weapon.”

Drifting with the wind, the ball of light steadily rose through the storm of spells being shot out by the other teachers and disappeared in the distant sky.

“All right, now watch.”

Then, with a small grunt, I pointed my wand at the golem and made a dramatic flourish.

Immediately after I did...

...an enormous icicle plummeted out of the sky.

It was taller and larger than most of the buildings in the city, a pillar that seemed to rise into the clear blue sky so high that you could never see the top, no matter how far up you looked.

This absolutely massive hunk of ice fell from the sky, aiming straight for the golem.

“.....!”

The golem raised both arms and caught my icicle. It began absorbing the magical ice into its upraised palms. However, no matter how much power it absorbed, the ice was endless.

The pillar kept on plunging down from the sky, with no end in sight.

Gradually, the golem’s feet began to crack. Fissures carved their way through its arms. Even so, the ice didn’t stop.

Even when its face began to crumble, even when its legs broke beneath it, even then, the ice did not stop.

Even when the golem reached the limits of its absorption and toppled to the ground, the ice didn't stop.

Even when the golem was flattened, its form no longer visible, the ice didn't stop.

Still, my ice continued to relentlessly pummel the ground, eventually covering it completely with a layer of pure white as it poured down, smashing into pieces on impact.

In the midst of this sudden snap freeze, the warmth of the approaching summer had been replaced with the frigid depths of winter.

"...Well, that ought to do it."

I blew on the tip of my wand, and a white puff of breath appeared, then disappeared.



I recalled what had happened seven years earlier.

"Watch out!"

By the time I heard her voice, the piece of rubble falling toward me had already been split in two. Standing between the halves was a beautiful mage with her purple hair done up in a single ponytail behind her head. I stared at her in blank amazement as she extended her hand and asked, "...Are you hurt?"

That was what she said to me, with a kind smile on her face.

I simply shook my head slowly as I straightened my clothes. I didn't want to let anyone know that I was hurt. I put on a show of courage.

Maybe because she realized that, or maybe because she was simply a kind person, the mage smiled and gently patted the top of my head.

Her hand was soft and warm.

"I'm glad you're all right."

I had never met her before, but she looked like she was truly relieved to see that I was okay.

I was in a daze, still processing everything that had happened. By the time I

realized that the mage patting me on the head had saved my life, I could only get out a few words.

“...Thank you very much.”

That was all I could manage.

“My pleasure,” the woman replied coolly. She withdrew her hand and turned on her heel, and with a few more waves of her wand, she cleared the rest of the falling rubble, rescuing other people with her magic.

The sensation of the mysterious hero’s warm hand lingered on top of my head. I absently rubbed the place where she had touched me.

I had kept her face, her physique, and everything else about her sealed in the depths of my memory until this moment. But as I gazed at her now, I fell in love with the idea of being a mage.

Linaria had already finished rescuing that pitiful girl by the time the giant pillar of ice appeared on the outskirts of town. The enormous column smashed into the ground like a sledgehammer, and the whole city shook with the impact.

“...Looks like it’s over, huh?”

Linaria stood gazing at the spectacle, her rescue efforts forgotten. I imagine everyone had stopped their evacuation to marvel at the massive icicle.

I stood next to Linaria, trying to look cool. “...Do the history books ever mention that the golem was defeated with a single attack?” I asked, staring at the pillar of ice.

Linaria glanced at me for a moment, then after a short silence, she nodded. “If I’m not mistaken, it’s written that one of the witches in town crushed the golem with a pillar of ice.”

If Linaria the history fanatic said so, then she probably wasn’t wrong.

“...That’s good. Everything will work out okay.”

“Sure will.”

I felt like I could relax now that the end of this whole awful mess was in sight. All the tension faded from my face, replaced by a carefree expression.

“Thank goodness...”

There was a smile on my face as I let out a sigh.

“.....” Linaria looked at me quizzically. “...Did something good happen?”

What are you talking about?

“The golem is finally gone! Why shouldn’t I be happy?”

“...That’s not what I mean.” Linaria shook her head unexpectedly. “Just then, you looked like you had something else to be happy about.”

“Huh?”

Did I look that way?

I turned and looked at my face in the window of a shop facing the main avenue.

I saw a girl grinning foolishly, like a maiden who has just fallen in love for the first time.

No matter how I looked at her, she was me. There was no one else there.

But I suppose that couldn’t be helped.

There was a person I had always longed to meet. Even if I could never remember her face or the way she looked, I’d always wanted to be like her, from the moment I set out to become a mage. And it turned out that this mysterious person from my precious memories, the one I admired, whom I had been searching for all along, was right in front of my eyes.

Of course I was happy.

“Linaria?”

I turned back to face her.

The more we use the time-reversing watch, the more we’re going to want to keep using it.

Going back to try to correct our past mistakes or to serve our selfish goals, these actions would ultimately become chains shackling us to the past. We might never be able to take even one step into the future. We could end up

wasting all the time we'd been given without even realizing it and, eventually, lose our ability to connect to the present.

But that was not going to be a problem for us anymore.

The one person I thought I'd never meet, the person I'd spent my whole life looking up to, had been with me all along.

After all our adventures in the past, I finally felt like I had found someone whom I could call a friend, and I knew that not a single moment leading up to now had been a waste.

So after taking a deep breath, I said, "Thank you very much."

I repeated my words of gratitude from earlier once more.

Linaria looked at me, and her eyes widened, just a little, in surprise, and then finally, as if answering a question with a question, replied with the same words she had spoken before.

The same simple words.

The words she had spoken seven years ago, and today.



CHAPTER 10

Many Years' Journey: Dear Friends

A little more than an hour after Linaria and Alte traveled to the past to get rid of the golem, the two of them returned together to the present.

“.....”

“.....”

They were covered in dust, but neither of them said a word. They remained silent. However, they didn't seem to be upset with each other. The silence between them seemed comfortable.

Both of their expressions were so bright, it was hard to imagine that they had just completed an extraordinary mission.

“Did something good happen to you back there?”

It was only natural that I would tilt my head and question them, don't you think?

“Nothing in particular. Why?” Alte immediately shook her head.

“Let's see...nothing to speak of, really.” Beside Alte, Linaria nodded affirmatively.

Seems there was something good...

And that both of them are terrible liars.

Though I don't really feel like prying further.

Anyway...

“Looks like you finished your mission without too much trouble, eh? Thank goodness.”

Even I thought saying that myself was quite shameless. After all, I was the one who had defeated the golem seven years ago.

Well, I suppose it doesn't really matter as long as it ended well.

I had defeated the golem and returned peace to the city.

Though it did mean that all of the university's magical conveniences became useless. That included the automatically returning library books and the perpetual incinerator.

It seems that from now on, this school is going to be a little more inconvenient.

"Teacher?"

Since almost everyone had used up all of their magical energy during the attack, campus was still a mountain of rubble. As I was looking up at the pile, Linaria suddenly spoke up behind me.

When I turned around, she was standing next to Alte.

They were holding hands.

In their joined hands was one time-reversing watch.

Linaria held it up for me to see and said, "Teacher, you said that our last journey should be our final one, but...could you let us go back in time just once more? One last time?"



Everything had started when I'd gotten a hold of Linaria's time-reversing watch. Its power had been too tempting, and in my greed, I had gone back in time again and again and caused the present state of affairs.

It was a terrible disaster.

Without meaning to, I had torn the country to pieces.

I needed to do some introspection. I had to.

At the same time, I knew that I must not repeat the same mistake over again.

Ultimately, so long as I had the power, I was sure to abuse it—and the more I messed with the timeline, the more Linaria and I would lose our ability to connect to the present.

So we had to go back.

"Alte?" Staring at the collapsed school building, fiddling with the knobs on the

watch, Linaria asked, “Are you ready?”

Neither of us knew when our final trip would take us. We would choose a time at random and get rid of the watch then. That’s what we had decided.

“I wonder what era we’ll jump to?” I said as I gripped the time-reversing watch along with Linaria.

“Who knows?” She smiled. “I turned the knob without looking, so we might fly off into the distant past for all I know.”

And then she entwined her fingers with mine. The metal of the watch warmed between our palms.

Then Linaria and I looked at each other.

She pressed the side button once.

We had no idea what awaited us.

But that was okay.

We were happier not knowing the future.

We were standing by the window of a dark classroom.

Outside the window, we could see the city, with tall buildings standing silently side by side. Looking down, I could see the flames of the incinerator, eternally flickering.

The scenery that met my eyes had something nostalgic about it.

The only thing that seemed different was that the school building where we were standing—in our time—was nothing but a big pile of rubble.

That meant we couldn’t have gone that far back into the past.

We had gone back only a few days, a totally unremarkable length of time.

“...But it would have been so interesting if it took us back four hundred years or something.” Beside me, the history geek had her cheeks puffed out in displeasure. “...I wanted to see the former library again...” She sulked.

“...Well, do you want to use it just once more?”

Though if we do that, we’ll have to act like we never got all sentimental and

promised that this would be the last time. And then we'll have to crawl back to our teacher and beg her to let us use the watch again. And then she'll probably scold us, and she'll definitely make fun of us, too, and...

"...Let's give up on that idea."

Apparently, Linaria had been picturing roughly the same scenario. She shook her head, looking queasy. "Yeah..."

I nodded. "Because this is the last time, right?"

And then, I squeezed the time-reversing watch between our palms. Linaria squeezed back.

Without looking at each other, hiding the fact that we were reluctant to part with the watch, we reached out and opened the window.

Autumn's cool breeze flowed in.

The chilly air brushed my throat and chilled my body. Only my fingers still had warmth to spare.

"...All right, let's do it." I looked at Linaria.

"...Yeah." She responded simply and smiled.

And then, we both nodded, and together, we flung the time-reversing watch into the air.

We watched the gentle silver arc as it fell away into the darkness.

I was hoping it might fall directly into the incinerator.

If it doesn't, well, I guess we can go down there and pick it up and toss it in, I told myself as I looked to see where it fell. We obviously hadn't put much thought into this whole thing.

Finally, the time-reversing watch landed with a *clunk*, giving off an awful noise.

"Owwwwwwwww!"

It landed right on the head of a country bumpkin working in front of the incinerator.

After the golem incident was finished, I went back with the other teachers to the crumbling campus.

Since all of us were totally exhausted, reconstruction would require some time, but we got the main school building cleaned up and back to normal in about three days.

After a short break, we began to conduct classes on campus again. And on that day, I quit being a teacher.

As a matter of fact...

I had only infiltrated this university in the first place so that I could deal with this one incident. Because seven years ago, just as I was leaving this city, I had encountered a girl who couldn't tell a lie, and I had been moved by her earnest words.

She had called me her teacher and told me that I was the one who, seven years later, would instruct her to send the golem into the past.

I continued my travels, and after seven years, I returned here to close the time loop. I had been the one to defeat the golem, after all, so I thought it was important for my past self that I stick around and make sure everything happened the way it was supposed to.

So now here I was, seven years older, and it was time for me to close the book on my time at the university. After all, I had accomplished everything I needed to, and at the end of the day, I was a traveler at heart.

However, even though I'd only been at the school a short while, I had apparently played the part of teacher pretty well, because when word of my resignation got out, my students decided to throw me a good-bye party.

They rented out my usual bakery (the one with the dining room attached), and the students sang songs for me and gave me letters and presents.

Laughing and crying, the girls gave me their best wishes for my departure.

"But Miiiiiiiiss...why are you leeeaaaviing...?" One of my students, a sweet country bumpkin named Alte, even clung to me, weeping.

".....*Sniffle.*" Surprisingly, even the cool and collected Linaria had tears in

her eyes. She was probably caught up in the moment by her good friend's crying.

I had almost felt the tears coming on several times as well, but I managed to hold them back, telling myself over and over that it wouldn't be proper for a teacher to cry, and I didn't want to set a bad example. I knew that if I started crying, too, it would spoil the mood of the farewell party.

In the end, we partied it up, so that the only thing anyone would remember was how much fun they had, right down to the very end.

By the time it got late, however, the bakery had once again fallen quiet. Most of the students had gone home by midnight, and in the early hours of the morning, the rest of them trickled out, bit by bit.

Eventually, there were only two students left with me, whining and complaining to the very last.

Maybe because she had partied too hard, one of them was fast asleep, using my lap as a pillow.

"...Heh-heh...what're ya doin'? Sheesh...heh-heh...," she mumbled in her country accent.

"Oh-hoh-hoh...so this is a four-hundred-year-old rock, huh? ...I love it..." As for the other student, she was leaning against my shoulder, also happily dreaming away.

"....."

I put a hand on each of the sleeping girls' heads and caressed them. These two were doing their best at school, and I knew that they had an exciting road to adulthood ahead.

Their lives would be more difficult than before now that they'd lost the ability to go back in time. They'd probably suffer some hardships, go through some setbacks, face trials and tribulations.

However...

As long as these two were together, I knew they would be all right.

They would work hard and grow up together.

“You know, if, one day, I get the chance to meet you two again, I think that would make me very happy,” I whispered to the sleeping girls.

So let's hold off on the tears till then.



*

The following day.

I gathered my things and walked off campus.

I proceeded down the main avenue, lined as always with tall buildings, until the city gate came into view.

“Good day, Madam Witch. Taking a trip?”

The gate guard bowed once.

I shook my head.

“Departing permanently.”

The guard nodded. “Certainly.” He quickly and efficiently filled out the departure paperwork and stepped away from the gate. “Well then, we wish you safe travels.”

Then the gate opened slowly, almost suspensefully.

An unknown future lay in wait for me on the other side.

And then, once again, I began a new journey.

Afterword

Jougi Shiraishi.

A light novel author active in Japan. His *Wandering Witch* series, which in 2016 marked his debut into the self-publishing trade and was simultaneously picked up and had its first issue released by GA Books, has now reached its seventh volume.

This man is now about to attempt a new challenge.

Am I really going to buy this?

“I mean, lately, I’ve been really keenly feeling my lack of physical strength, so if I want to exercise...there’s nothing to do but buy the thing, right?”

He has a problem that has been aggravating him.

Inactivity.

Whether working at his principal job or at his writing, he never has to move very much. And when it comes to days off, he spends all day long just eating, sleeping, watching anime, and reading books, and before he realizes it, the sun has set and he’s muttering to himself, “Huh, seriously? It’s already night? I haven’t done anything...”

Is anyone surprised that this zombie, human in name only, would fall into a pattern of inactivity?

Fresh in everyone’s memories is the utter nonsense that he included in the afterword of Volume 6: “I want to make 2018 the year when I do a moderate amount of exercise.”

If you’re going to exercise, can’t you go running outdoors?

“Well, I can’t run when it’s raining, now can I? And then you know what would happen, right? Really, it would be bad! Whatever happened.”

Isn't it a waste of money?

“No, of course it's not! Absolutely not a waste of money! Seriously! If I buy it, I swear I'll go running every day! Really!”

Fresh in everyone's memories is the time when, one year ago, this man purchased a robot vacuum, then ended up being stuck cleaning the corners of his room himself because the carpet that covered the floor was the type that can't be cleaned by a robot vacuum. Also fresh is the memory that, since he had the robot set to start cleaning automatically every morning at five, he would wake up irritated every day. You could say that instead of a robot vacuum, the man purchased a very obnoxious alarm clock.

If you buy it, will you use it every day?

“Of course I will! With gusto! I'll get back the stamina that I've lost over these past two years!”

With a raised voice, he places his online order.

For a treadmill.

And that is how this man got himself a treadmill that allows him to easily exercise in the comfort of his own home, both solving the problem of his inactivity as well as fulfilling his desire to never step foot outside the house. Ever since that day, he has continued running over the rattling roller just like a hamster in a wheel.

His challenge continues...

And so, I am Jougi Shiraishi, new owner of a treadmill. It's been a while. Hello.

The series has continued for a long time, and we've come to the seventh volume.

There are all sorts of things I'd like to tell you, but as usual, I'd like to start first with my comments on each chapter, including spoilers. All right, here we go!

Chapter 1: “Once Upon a Time, in a Certain Place”

This is the prologue to the first six chapters of Volume 7. This time around, the book has a split structure. Chapters one through six are their own stories, and everything from chapter seven on is a separate part.

Chapter 2: “Sharon the Liar”

This is the last chapter I wrote for Volume 7. Since much of the book is devoted to serious stories, I thought I would write something silly.

Unlike the character of Alte in the final chapters, Sharon has no magical talent, but even without talent, she never loses sight of her goals. Sharon’s a character who takes a different approach to get what she wants.

Chapter 3: “Things Unseen”

Medusa was the inspiration for Elfriede. It’s common knowledge that Medusa turns anyone who looks her in the eye to stone, but I wondered what would happen in the case that the other party was blind, and I more or less made a story out of that simple question.

I like to think that after the end of their tale, the two characters who weren’t able to look anyone in the eye lived peacefully as two normal people.

Just as an aside, I quite like the situation of a man and woman living quietly in the forest together.

Chapter 4: “Of Statues and Witches”

This happened quite a while ago, but I’m sure you remember the story of the old woman who was chastised for trying to repair an old painting without permission. It was in the news for a while. That was more or less the inspiration for this story. I feel like it had been a long time since I had written a story that featured Saya.

Chapter 5: “Village of Beauties”

This chapter was originally intended to be part of Volume 6, but Volume 6 already had several heavy stories, and on top of that, the page count was getting long, so it got pushed into Volume 7.

There are several species of spiders and praying mantises where the female will consume the male after mating. The behaviors of such creatures were the inspiration for this story.

By the way, the name for sheep’s meat changes depending on how grown the sheep is. Baby sheep’s meat is lamb, while adult meat is mutton.

Chapter 6: “A Tale of Monsters and Misguided Humans”

People often say that time heals all wounds, and in Luciella’s and Natasha’s cases, both of them were simply born before their time. I think that most people, once they become adults, start to think more about the villains of the fairy tales we read as children, wondering whether they really are nothing more than villains, or whether they might not be all that villainous after all.

By the way, an editor appears toward the end of this chapter, but you must absolutely not take this character to be based on the editor who has taken such good care of me! I’m serious!

Final Chapters: “Many Years’ Journey”

Adult Elaina appeared in this volume, so with the next book, we’ll start stories from seven years later! Not really. In Volume 8, I’m planning to revert Elaina to her usual transparent teenage self, the same old scheming, sharp-tongued yet polite girl we know and love, so please look forward to that. I’d be gratified if you would be so kind as to read this story as one of many possible futures.

I wrote all sorts of things, and this became my longest story to date.

When I look back on my own school days, I like to think that not a single thing from that time was pointless. It’s not all wonderful, nice memories, but since there’s certain to come a time in the future when even the regrets, even the experience of hardship, even the incidents when things end in failure despite your efforts will be useful to you, I think going through them is vastly better than doing nothing.

By the way, I’m changing the subject, but back on April 1, there was a light novel author named Jougi Shiraishi who got carried away and tweeted that, “Adult Elaina is going to appear in Volume 7! That’s a lie, though!” But in reality, by that time, it was already a certainty that adult Elaina would be appearing, and when Volume 7 first went on sale, he tweeted again, “Ah, did I say that it was a lie back then? Actually, that was the lie, though.” A few days later, he came to his senses and thought back on his actions, *Huh...what was I thinking with those lies...? I’m an idiot, aren’t I?* If I had a time-reversing watch, I would for sure have booted myself back to April 1.

So those are my comments on each chapter.

This time, the manuscript took longer than usual, and before I realized it, I was really cutting it close to the deadline. I'm really sorry for any trouble I caused...

By the time Volume 7 goes on sale, I think this information will be public, so I'm going to take the liberty of writing about it in my afterword. We're planning to start selling *Journey of Elaina* drama CDs this November! Thanks in advance for checking them out. By the way, since the day I received the cast list, my fingers haven't stopped trembling from excitement, but...what to do...? As things stand, I feel like my fingers might fly right off when I get my copy of the recording!

As I write this afterword, I've also been allowed to read the first manuscript for the manga version of *Journey of Elaina*. The drawings by Ikki Nanao, who has taken charge of turning it into a manga, are really, really incredible, and I ended up reading it over and over again. As I was reading the manuscript, I was tearing up in my room and shouting words that weren't quite words to myself the whole time, like, "Aaah! Amazing! Ah! Yes, yes! Ahhh!" Manga writers are incredible...

When I see the stories and characters that originally existed only in my mind get put into illustrations, and now have voices put to them, and even get drawn as manga, I feel like the path to get here has been a long one, but I'm sincerely glad that I kept on running down it without stopping. Together with my new treadmill, I want to keep on running, so thank you for your everlasting support.

Well then, on to the acknowledgments.

To the head editor, M:

Thank you for always taking good care of me. Especially this time, thank you so much for sticking with me as I made amendments until the very last second. You're the one who told me earliest that, "Sometimes good material will come to mind while you're running, so I recommend it," but since the only thing that came up when I went running outside was a wave of nausea, I'm now running quietly inside my own room. If I puke in my room, it's no problem!

To Azure:

Thank you as always for your adorable illustrations. I really like the cover

illustration for this volume... I always like them, but a scene of walking by the seaside hasn't come up before now, so...

By the way, this is completely unrelated, but the last time we talked, Azure mentioned a dislike of mushrooms, and I felt a strange affinity between us.

To everyone else involved:

To everyone in operations at SB Creative, everyone in the GA Novels editing department, all of the bookstore employees, everyone at the printer's, and everyone else who had a part in this publication—

Truly, thank you all very much. I look forward to working with you again.

And to all my readers:

Thank you for sticking with it to Volume 7! The publication of Volume 8 in November is going to be a special edition including the drama CD, so please enjoy! Please, please reserve your copy!

Well then, let's meet again next time. See ya!

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